

“Aquamarine Sky: To Each His Own”

Not worthy.

You know, sometimes, all it takes is to stop and breathe in the rancid stench of a garbage heap to realize just how thoroughly the world has turned itself inside out.

The courier — though once they called him President, a title that now felt as foreign to him as an ancient dialect — pedaled slowly down a fractured strip of asphalt. Each jolt from the broken surface reverberated through his aging bones like echoes from a forgotten war. Sixty-three. He felt like eighty. His back curved under the weight of the delivery bag — not with food, not medicine, not secrets, but bureaucracy: a few crumpled envelopes, a couple of stamped documents nobody would ever read. A gesture. A shadow.

From his own life, he carried just three things: a half-crushed cigarette pack, a warm can of synthetic energy drink fizzling ominously in the heat, and a few coins in his pocket. Fifty-seven cents. Plus, a rusty button that smelled faintly of hairspray and past privilege. He didn't know where it came from. Maybe from a suit he no longer owned. Maybe from the time he could still afford a stylist.

“No tip again,” he grunted, spitting toward a dented trash bin. The spit missed, splattering limply across the pavement — just like his hope for even a half-decent day. Once, the sight of him sent chills down the spine of entire parliaments. Now? People didn't even make eye contact. They yanked the door open, grabbed their packages, and slammed it shut like he was invisible.

He vaguely remembered — or hallucinated remembering — signing

something called the “Efficient Redistribution Act.” Some freak in a hallway, who smelled like burnt plastic and sour rain, had shoved it under his nose: “Just sign, and your popularity will skyrocket.” That man now sat cross-legged in a piss-stained blanket, trading lighters for canned beans. The legislation had passed. And now the rot came full circle — literally under his nose.

The route led him past the south dump — a grotesque monument to civilization’s decay. A gray sea of carcasses: fridges, drones, party posters, urns with faded slogans. The walking dead wandered through it — not zombies, but worse. Former humans. Bent figures in patchwork clothes. Faces the color of moldy bread. Eyes like dead light bulbs.

He recognized them — not by logic, but instinct. That one with the leather folder used to be a senator, the one who chanted “stability” like a hymn. The bearded creature in a torn judicial robe? Chief Judge of Asset Reallocation. They all knew who they were. That was the punishment: to remember their power and forget the passwords.

The system they’d built — crooked as a drunk’s jawline — had exacted poetic vengeance. Their protégés replaced them. Then lost memory. Then were replaced. The loop spun on. Former kings now peddled stories for coins, gave monologues to pigeons, screamed into alleyways. Some died. Others simply evaporated.

He slowed near a wall. A curled vinyl banner hung there, flapping like tired skin. Faded by sun, stained by spit. On it — his own face. Young. Shaven. Hair like a campaign ad. Eyes blazing with conviction. Underneath:

“Justice. Strength. A Decent Future — For Everyone.”

He snorted bitterly — a wet, involuntary sound, like swallowing a wasp.

“Quiet down, psycho!” someone barked from the trash heaps.

He didn’t react. A memory surfaced, jagged and incomplete — like a broken reel in an ancient cinema. Not a scene, but a sensation. The room. His office. Glass walls from floor to ceiling. The city stretched out below, neat and controllable, like a simulation.

On the table: a cup of coffee, untouched.
Sitting opposite him — Martin Lacasse, head of the Reality Control and Information Modeling Service. The man who didn't just own networks — he *was* the protocol. UN, corporations, shadow councils — all in his breast pocket. Not a grey cardinal. A skeleton key. The hidden core.

Why *this* memory? Not an inauguration? Not applause?

“President,” Lacasse had said, his voice as smooth as an English butler's, his smile carved from marble.

“You are the face. We are the bone. Understand that — and you will rule. Misunderstand — and you will be replaced.”

Pause.

“I will build a world where the worthy take what they want. The rest? They can beg for scraps. That's fairness, isn't it?”

Reality snapped back.

A voice pulled him from the haze. “Hey... Got any change?”

In front of him stood a man in a tattered coat. Once a Brioni. His cheeks were hollow, eyes glassy. The courier's neural archive scanned, matched, clicked: Lacasse. The architect. The puppeteer. He was leaning forward now, trembling.

“Water... please... I need water...”

The courier's spine stiffened. His gut churned.

The line returned: *the worthy take, the rest beg*.
What about him now? Begging for tips. Biking deliveries. Forgotten.

“Brother... ten cents? I’ll tell you a story. Real one. No filters. No AI.”

The courier fished out a coin. Ten cents. The irony reeked. He rolled it between his fingers. Lacasse straightened, cleared his throat — like preparing for a UN broadcast.

“I am Martin Lacasse,” he began, not with madness but grandeur. “Kings applauded. Presidents bowed. The Chinese called me ‘The Shadow of the Dragon.’ I orchestrated flows. I signed laws before the senators saw them. I could’ve built palaces here — fountains, peacocks, sequined drones. But...”

He paused, eye twitching. “Only the worthy drink Acqua di Cristallo with diamonds, right?”

The courier handed him the coin.

Lacasse blinked. “You’re decent,” he whispered. “Not like them.”

Then the terminal beeped: new order. Groceries. Water. Cheap bread. Another energy drink. He turned. Got on the bike. Left.

Lacasse watched him fade into the smog, then turned toward a poster — *his own face*, with the slogan:

“The Worthy Take What They Want.”

His cheeks flushed red. Not from cold. From memory. Rage. Shame.

Those were *his* words.

He had printed them. Funded them. Mandated them. And now he begged for hydration. No fountains. No sequins. No peacocks. Just a mud puddle and a coin.

He collapsed to the sidewalk, knees giving out.

“It should’ve been different,” he whispered to no one. “Not *the worthy*... everyone. Bread. Water. Heat. For everyone...”

The courier never looked back.

And neither of them noticed the drone. Small. Silent. Watching.

In an office far above, Rina — a junior journalist at Aquamarine — stared at the feed, frozen. Her AI assistant zoomed, stabilized. A coin. A face. The algorithm flagged it:

Subject: Martin Lacasse (Missing 5 Years)

Former Director, Reality Control

Confirmed Match: 93% Facial + Gait + Voice Pattern

A chill crawled up her neck. A legend. A ghost. In rags.

“And the courier...” she whispered.

The system pinged. Facial match.

“Courier ID: Lukas Solh, 63. Former President.”

“A president and a puppeteer... by the dumpsters...” she muttered.

She activated stealth cam mode. The drone inched closer. Rain began to fall.

“Mr. Lacasse?” she said into the mic.

He turned. Clouded eyes. She tapped her badge on the visor. “Rina. Aquamarine Media. May I speak—”

He twitched. Laughed? Shivered? A coin in his palm.

“The president...” he said. “The one who left. He gave it to the water. Not to me. Fair, isn’t it?”

Rina hesitated. The drone circled above. “Do you know him?”

He smiled with cracked lips. “You people... you lie with elegance. You name your city Aquamarine, but the sky is brown. Write that!”

He thrust the coin forward.

“Headline it! ‘President gives alms to the puppet master!’ The system fed on us like a beast!”

He stepped closer. Rina flinched.

“I held the world’s throat,” he whispered. “Now? To each his own.”

Then he vanished into the fog.

Her comm buzzed. The editor’s voice: “Rina! Did you get it?!”

“I got everything. All of it.”

“Good. But edit it. Faces out. No names. Just ‘President helps homeless man.’ Wide shot. Soft colors. Human angle. Got it?”

She didn’t reply. The drone whirred in silence.

“Headline,” the voice continued. “Something sweet. ‘The President Who Still Cares.’ Use it.”

Rina nodded absently. Then — disabled live mode. Uploaded raw footage to a hidden node. Labeled:

“LACASSE FILE // RED: UNEDITED // ACCESS: ME ONLY”

She sat in the rain. Watching. Processing.

It wasn’t fiction. It wasn’t drama. It was the future.

She opened her recorder: “An empty avenue. Rain falling like truth. A former god limps through puddles.

A coin jingles. The puddle reflects the sky. The sky is aquamarine. For the first time.”

"Aquamarine Sky: Version 32"

System voice

[AUDIO RECORDING #AVR-PR1932A-HK]

The judge leaned back in his chair, his spine resisting, his eyes fixed on the projection screen where timelines twisted and shimmered — threads in an aquamarine web, a utopia too clean to be real. A perfect sky, yes, but only in puddle reflections.

The room was sterile, quiet. No seams on the white walls. The low hum of cooling servers whispered like a breath between thoughts. The sharp scent of ozone mixed with the bitter tail of unfinished coffee. He spoke into the dictation module — slowly, deliberately, as if talking not just to the archivist half-dissolved in the shadow of the room, tablet in hand, but also to himself. Or to someone who might one day listen. Someone *after*.

“Begin stenography. This is for the record, isn’t it? Good. Then listen.”

His voice scratched the silence.

“Case: PR1932-A-HK. Strange markings, these... Not random. Why are there no normal names left in the system? Why the extra tags? I only ever see them when something doesn’t fit.”

A pause.

“Yes, that’s what I noticed first. Do you agree? Of course you do. You always agree.”

The judge’s eyes stayed fixed on the screen, but the weight of his words shifted to the man in the shadows.

“Your role is to record. Purify. Preserve the official truth. But sometimes I wonder — what if you *didn’t* agree? What would break first: the protocol... or us?”

The archivist nodded slightly. His gaze didn’t waver from the screen, where the judge’s voice was being converted into immaculate lines of text — stripped of ambiguity, stripped of weight. Sanitized. As always. Safe from “dumbassism,” as they called it in the hallways.

“Dumbassism” — a bureaucratic joke about those who requested access to truth without clearance. Their system, on paper, was halfway to utopia. A

sleek blend of people's democracy and data-driven socialism. Voting was anonymous, filtered through access levels and processed by agents. Final decisions went to the Collegium. But the burden — the weight of consequence — always returned to the judge. Like a collar. Like a chain.

Bribes were impossible. Everything was audited by code. Corruption had no place here.

And yet — the truth warped, media inflated like lungs full of borrowed air, society walking the edge of collective ego-collapse. Narcissism was pandemic. Attention shifted, always, to “stability.”

The judge blinked and pulled up a historical overlay: 1933. Dachau. Labeled “re-education.” The escalation buried in words like “unity.”

“We edit the past to avoid war,” he murmured. “And yet the people digging through trash outside — they’re our failure.”

He tapped the edge of his cup. The coffee was cold.

“And here we are. Gods in parallel worlds. Changing timelines by decree. But empathy— where does that fit in the algorithm? Is it a glitch? Or is it the missing variable?”

He tilted his head slightly.

“Are you still writing this?”

The archivist’s voice was dry, mechanical: “Ready for the briefing?” He swiped open the agent’s file.

“Straightforward. Physically sound. Mental stability confirmed. Thirty-three years old. Raised in a mid-tier family. Parents surrendered him to the system—”

“—for a better life,” the judge cut in. “From laborers to middle-class. Prestige. Security. In exchange for a child.”

“Not of the ‘Crowned Nationality,’” the archivist noted flatly.

“Ah yes. Class purity disguised as meritocracy. Genetic clean lines. A sniper tasked with maintaining bloodlines.”

“He’s a marksman,” the archivist continued, “can split a coin at a hundred meters. Persuasion skill: 74. Strategic calculation: 42 moves ahead. A chess player. A public speaker. A role model. His family receives dividends in respect.”

The judge raised his hand. The file expanded.

[AGENT FILE: AV-Gamma-2129 — Clearance 3]

- Indoctrinated from early childhood.
- Parents: casualties of upward mobility.

- Motivation: glory, duty, systemic legacy.
- Simulations: 620 / 620 — flawless.
- Forecast beyond age 33: strategist, possible peacekeeper.

The judge's voice flattened.

“Case confirmed. Target: Obersalzberg. Year: 1932. Location: Berghof. Mission: eliminate. Infiltration: six months. Two shots. Chest. Confirm. Then: pill.”

The agent enters. His footsteps are silent. He sits — not touching the chair's back.

“Sit, Agent. Case PR1932-A-HK. You know the details, but we follow protocol.”

The screen glows.

“Target location: southern slope. Berchtesgaden. Obersalzberg trail.

Observation post confirmed. Weather: neutral. Security: bypassed.

Reality must remain on track. Simulate stability. Wait 183 days. Optimal deviation point. Dantesal effect — confirmed.”

The archivist gives a small nod. The judge gives a smaller one in return.

“Final simulation. Confirm readiness.” The agent stands, enters the capsule.

SIMULATION: 1932

Snow crunches underfoot. The air bites. The Alps glow with pale sun.

He crouches in a half-buried cabin, rifle balanced. The Berghof residence glints below, tucked in the rocks and fog.

A figure in uniform appears in the crosshairs.

The coin falls. A signal.

Two shots. One chest. One control. Silence.

He swallows the pill. Thoughts drift:

1. Reboot to next timeline.
2. Mind preserved, body discarded.
3. Freedom—but without empathy.

The screen fades. The capsule dims.

POST-SIMULATION / BRIEFING ROOM

The archivist reads:

“33-year protocol complete. Text compiled.”

The judge: “How does it sound?”

“On this day, the system took a step toward humanity. Balanced decision. Executed with honor and precision. Preliminary analysis initiated.”

The judge snorts softly. “Theory aside. We’ll see what the branch becomes.”

The archivist pauses. Lowers his voice. “The goal is one thing. The *meaning* — another.”

TRANSITION INITIATED

The capsule lights change. Final sequence.
“Simulation complete. Result: 100% match.”

The judge rises. Walks to the capsule. “Launch mission. Open stream.”

The light flares. The capsule vanishes. Silence. “It’s starting,” someone whispers in the dark.

Six months in silence

The agent opened his eyes. Frost clung to the inside of the capsule window, veiling the world beyond in a hazy blur. Jagged Alpine peaks rose like teeth, tearing into an aquamarine sky that still shimmered with the tremors of morning cold. It was beautiful—too beautiful.

When the capsule hissed open, the shock of fresh air stole his breath. Mountains. Sky. Sunrise. Each detail shimmered with a fidelity that no simulation had ever dared to replicate. This was not rendering—this was reality.

He paused. Five minutes wouldn't change the mission, but this moment was worth it. He took out his compact camera—not for the report, but for himself—and captured a few quick shots. Then, pulling a camouflage tarp over the capsule, he began his trek toward the known destination. Four kilometers to go.

The cold cut through his coat in stinging bursts. Moisture gathered in his lungs with each breath. Real. Not synthetic. “Finally,” he thought, lowering his hood. The wind carried the scent of snow, pine needles, and distant hearth smoke. 1932. Six months before Day X.

His backpack settled heavily against his shoulders. Inside it: forged documents, outdated Reichsmarks, counterfeit military medals—an identity built to impersonate a veteran of phantom wars. And one weapon: the Walther Equalizer. Outwardly a 1930 relic; internally, a marvel. .22 caliber, integrated suppressor, auto-guided bullets, 39-round magazine with optional drum and stock. It could tear through anything in this era. Quiet. Precise. Final.

He stopped to stare at the sky. That impossible aquamarine. His boots crunched along the narrow path, the snow beneath him so crisp it felt hyperreal. Unlike simulations, the cold truly bit. His breath fogged the air.

The hunting lodge emerged ahead modest but solid. No ornate decoration, only function. Dantesalian comfort. A place for noblemen to prepare for the hunt or warm themselves after one. Wooden walls, a stout stove, rooms with private baths, and a wide central hall with a fireplace and a view over the Berghof's southern slope. Ideal for gathering. Or hiding.

This would be his base. Here, he would trace routes, rehearse movements, polish his aim. The apartment in the nearby village—bare-bones, bed and lamp—served only to deflect attention.

Patrols, drunk on schnapps, were laughably easy to evade. The simulations were accurate: 100% success rate. Everything was on track.

And he had six months.

Upon arrival, he unpacked in silence. Sat at the long table. Assembled the semi-auto rifle with practiced speed, narrating softly into a camera for his own record.

“Alright, alright. Where were we? Optics—thermal sensor. Auto-guidance locked. Hold the trigger for three seconds, let it think, then fire. That’s it. Now we can sit back and drink schnapps. This one’s a pleasure to shoot.”

Everything was prepared. Routes rehearsed. Timelines cross-checked. Calculations exact to the second.

His target: a location 3 kilometers from the residence. The setup was ideal—high ground, clear line of sight, natural cover. To most, it would seem exposed. But in this era, only artillery fired from that distance. And there was none here. No one was looking his way. He could fire from the comfort of the lodge, even through the window, if needed. It was suspiciously perfect.

Best of all, when Adolf was in the city, this

hunting house, like the others, remained vacant. Hunting permits were tightly controlled during those weeks. Few bothered. The lodges stayed empty.

Yes, there were patrols. Occasional guards. But their flasks were full. Getting past them was easy. In simulations, the agent once took a drum, played a march as he walked. The guards joined in, clapping. Some danced. Once, they sang the song in their sleep.

But this wasn't a simulation. Here, he followed protocol. No improvisation. No flair. Everyone understood the rules. But no one had said how to endure six months of waiting.

The first weeks were hollow. Scheduled meals. Physical drills. Long meditations. Hours spent staring from the window. Sometimes, he spoke to the lamp's shadow, just to hear a voice.

Then boredom came.

A sticky, sprawling, quiet thing. The kind of boredom that feels like eternity has opened its mouth but refuses to speak. Simulations never had this. They were dense, fast, focused. Here, time stretched. Life loitered.

He began playing harmless games. Not with the mission—never with the mission. But with his routine. Wake up 12 minutes later. Buy a new pair

of socks. Read an ignored newspaper cover to cover. Start noticing the coffee's smell each morning. Take new paths to the same stores. Pretend to be a man, not an agent.

Still, boredom gnawed. Days merged. Bread, cheese, metallic coffee. Training: hitting coins tossed into snow. Meditation: to stave off madness.

And the pill? People said different things. Officially, it completed the mission. A symbol. A tool. But rumors swirled.

He dreamt of it: the pill wasn't death. It was transfer. Restart. A new mission. Again. And again. And again. Until he became machine. Or code. Archive without memory. Freedom? Perhaps. But without feeling. A king of the past, stripped of joy. A ghost in systems.

He wondered: were these his last months as himself?

"My family sacrificed me for the stars," he reflected. "Poor, proud parents traded me for status—scraping from the gutter to the middle class. Honor? Or servitude?"

Then came the chalk.

Yellow, broken, lying on a muddy path. On a whim, he scrawled words on the blank wall of the town hall:

Power corrupts.

The letters were uneven. Childlike. Raw. He needed proof he was alive. In simulations, this message would be erased by morning. The system kept itself clean.

He smiled. He left the chalk.

Later, a woman passed. Saw the inscription. Said nothing. But the next day, beneath his words, a note appeared: “—O.” A single initial. Witness? Rebel? Artist?

The building had strict censorship. All messages had to vanish by noon. His remained.

Then, a boy. Ten, perhaps. Drew a face beside the phrase. Cartoonish. Recognizable. A mustache. Slanted hair.

They caught him.

The wall remained untouched. The system, so sure of itself, had failed.

And then—it happened.

Adolf's motorcade returned. A minor malfunction forced a pause near the lodge. He saw the wall. He saw the words. The signature. The drawing.

He stopped the car.

Officers explained. “A boy. Mischievous. Ten.

Detained.”

Adolf frowned. Angry. Unsettled.

Orders were given. The boy and his father summoned.

The agent bought a newspaper. Nothing about the incident. As if it never happened.

Panic.

Was his message a spark?

Not disaster—yet. The plan held. The meeting on Day X remained. But something shifted.

He stared at the newspaper. He knew. That chalk—his hand—began this.

He had pulled a child into the storm.

Now, he had to know what came next.

In the archives of his memory, one officer’s name had appeared—after Day X. Before then, he was absent.

An opening. A disguise. A uniform. A false cover.

He would infiltrate the meeting as military intelligence.

Scenarios played in his mind. Two ended in ruin. One required him to be there.

And so, unknowingly, the agent set in motion a

chain of events that no tribunal—not even the Court of Last Instance—could halt.

90 hours

The timer is running. Everything should be perfect: the script is written, the simulations have been run, the target's behavior is predictable down to the minute. But no one considered a single short inscription made in chalk. They overlooked the significance of one woman's signature and a boy's simple drawing of what he saw. A trifle — and it is precisely such trifles that break reality.

An agent who has lived through this period hundreds of times in simulations begins to understand life. Some days are painfully boring. Before, he knew that would happen every hour. But now every deviation hits his nerves like a blow. It's too real. Too human.

He broke the rules. He was supposed to remain a shadow. An agent is a shadow, an anonymous figure, invisible, everywhere and nowhere. But he wrote on the wall. Stupid. Childish prank. And everything went differently.

The inscription was noticed. Someone had written "— O." underneath it. Just a letter, a symbol. The authorities did not react immediately, only because the inscription was not in *the right* place. If it had been on the municipal building, it would have been erased instantly. But here, they noticed it too late. They gave the order to remove it. They were too late.

A child drew a portrait next to it. The boy was, as is often the case, mischievous and a little spoiled. Judging by this, the boy's father was a respected man in the city. As the newspapers wrote, "In the eyes of the authorities, he was almost a 'fascist of the right kind': he said the right things and served the regime." And the boy was just drawing. And that changed everything.

Why did Adolf take a different route? And what difference does it make? There should have been nothing there — just a smudge of paint on the Dante sum. Even if the car had stopped and he had seen just a smudged inscription, he would have seen it and thought about it. Not about the inscription, but about the fact that something was wrong. Maybe he was angry, but not at the inscription, but at the very feeling of failure. It is certain that everyone in this reality felt it: chaos crept in.

The boy's father is urgently called to a meeting. Rumors, intrigue — Adolf is unpredictable. The meeting is set. In 90 hours, he will be at a closed meeting. The agent knows when, but not where. He doesn't realize that he is no longer in control — right now, it's pure improvisation, although later he will surely explain everything as it should be.

With these thoughts in mind, the agent checks that everything is going according to plan and that there are no major deviations from reality. Time has almost stopped again.

Twenty-four hours before the appointed time, during a routine check of data and messages on all frequencies, the agent notices that one communication session between his target and the supervisor, which was supposed to take place on an encrypted channel, did not happen. The agent initiated the mission core compilation protocol on the tablet, indicating all the data and the incident with the drawing, and adding the deviation log.

The tablet data was updated.

A message flashed across the screen: deviation 96%. Target geo data changed... System analysis and message interception.
Summary.

The meeting where the target will be transferred has been moved... show more?

The agent looks at the message, rereads it again and again, thinking feverishly. He considers the options. Reread it again.

"Only two options?" he muttered under his breath.

One is insanely risky: be nearby at the time of the meeting and try

to redirect the course of events on the spot. But that's not even the problem. Now nothing is clear at all, not in the simulation, but. His mind was swarming with thoughts.

All his training, all his shooting, all his precision had been calculated for a single shot — from a predetermined position. A position from which he was supposed to eliminate the target, his only chance. The meeting had been moved to an unknown location. His sniper position, like years of training, was turning into a pumpkin. He had to act fast.

He has no right to shoot now. He wasn't supposed to interfere — but he already has.

The second option is to find out where the meeting place is and move closer. Upgrade his pistol to a machine gun and complete the mission in a simpler way.

The system is still waiting for the moment of execution. According to the plan, at the appointed hour, he will have to take a pill. No one knows what it does. Rumors say it erases memories, gives a new life... eternal rest... or sends you to hell. But now he has these 90 hours. He will watch. Look for a way out. Prepare. And maybe speak when the moment comes.

The next step is moment X. But what it will bring is still undecided. It all depends on who is now in control of reality. And who dares to change it.

72 hours

Reality unfolds across cold, hovering panels. Germany. 1932.

Figures shift on the surface — clean lines, arrows, pulsing graphs. Temperature. Wind direction. Logistics. All in order. Or so it seems.

“Weather confirmed?” The judge doesn’t lift his gaze.

“Yes. Clear skies. Temperature twenty-one point two. Humidity stable. Atmospheric pressure holding.” The archivist’s voice is even, practiced — like someone who’s said these words a thousand times to a thousand judges.

“Traffic?” “No disruptions. No anomalies in the last seventy-two hours.”

A flick of the judge’s eyes to a blinking point on the map.

“And this marker... the agent. Any deviation?”

“Within acceptable margins. Some emotional shifts, but nothing critical. He’s active. Mapping terrain. Running simulations. Reviewing operational heuristics.”

The judge leans back — slow, deliberate. Speaking to no one in particular:

“When a mechanism functions too precisely... that, too, is a concern. Understand?”

The archivist hesitates before replying.

“It functions as designed.” A silence stretches between them. Then:

“That’s an order, archivist. Record this verbatim.” The archivist taps a key. The stenography begins.

“Even the most refined systems allow for fractures — hairline, hidden. An agent is not a manufactured product. He’s not crowned. Not inherited. His blood isn’t indexed in any genetic ledger. And

yet — he's flawless. Reflexes. Intuition. Empathy. We've sharpened him for decades.

He is not from that time. But he's walking in it now — 1932 — among those who would soon rewrite history in blood. And we've given him purpose. A mission.

He observes. He acts. But in truth, he bends reality around him. We say what to do, where to go, how to proceed — but what if he chooses something else?

That thought alone... is destabilizing.

Because we don't have a protocol for that."

The archivist subtly edits. Removes everything about blood, inheritance, risk. What remains:

"Subject actions remain within operational limits. System response normal. Deviations logged but not significant. No threat to the mission."

The judge points again. The agent's tag blinks faintly.

"Any patterns in the noise? Any signal we missed?"

"Level two anomaly. Unknown source. Potential interaction with an unscheduled information node. Still under review. Likely inconsequential."

"We don't operate on 'likely'. Not at this scale." The archivist nods. Lowering his voice:

"Increased activity over the last seventy-two hours. He's shifted out of passive mode. Investigating. Possibly adapting."

The judge allows a faint smile. "Adaptation births disaster. Or history."

"Filed under 'no impact on mission parameters?'"

"Of course. File it. Then erase it. As always. Like everything else."

The screen fades. Left behind: white letters on black.

Operation: Active. Time Remaining: 72:00:00

The archivist composes the final memo. Encrypts it. Sends it. Then, after a pause:

“In a few more hours... he’ll either become a name etched in time, or the footnote to another cascade of failure.”

The judge says nothing. He just watches the darkened panel.

Where once there was a name. And a date.

Day X

Twelve hours before the operation deadline, the agent received new coordinates. The meeting had been moved — not to a city, not to a guarded villa, but into the very hunting lodge he'd used for months. The same quiet place where he had eaten, trained, meditated. The same chair by the window where he had rehearsed a hundred variations of the shot. Now, that window would not frame a target from afar, but host the meeting itself. In that very room. A coincidence? No. Too unlikely. Too precise.

That house had been selected years ago. It was built for this. The agent had memorized every approach. The paths through the trees, the fallback routes, the blind spots. The structure had been updated, upgraded, customized. A sealed weapons hatch in the kitchen. A false wall in the washroom concealing an uplink. The cellar packed with outdated communications gear and freshly installed directional charges. Silent transmitters. Triggers with infinite delay. Mines triggered by vibration, heartbeat, even scent. All still active. All under his control.

He moved like a ghost through the familiar rooms. No hesitation. His fingers found hidden switches

without thought. In the hallway, he paused near a bookshelf where the master panel was hidden. Still worked. The system was live.

This was never meant to be a place for visitors. It was designed for silence, for one clean shot, and total erasure afterward.

But the plan had changed.

The target would now enter the house. Not just the target. Others too. A child. His father. Staff. Maybe guards. Maybe not. The agent didn't know yet — he only knew that the boy was unexpected. And that the presence of the father shifted the tone. He had seen his name on the list. The man wasn't part of the command structure. A civilian, with an old friendship from before the uniform.

Adolf. The most obvious name on the manifest — and yet, today, it didn't feel like the center of the story.

The agent sat in the old leather chair by the window, hands folded in thought. The pistol rested on the table beside him — the “Owl.” It was small, modest, unremarkable to the eye. But inside, a marvel: a miniature suppressor, tuned sight, smart guidance, ballistic correction. Compact enough to hide in plain sight, powerful enough to end a war before it started. He flicked

the safety on. Off. On again.

Outside, wind shook the frost from the pines.

Inside, nothing moved. He had to decide.

He could activate the charges remotely. Collapse the roof. End it. Minimal risk to himself. Or... he could improvise. Enter the room under a cover identity. Intervene. Redirect the narrative. Delay. Disarm. Speak.

But that would mean breaking protocol. No system had written instructions for what was happening now. This meeting — this exact convergence — was never supposed to happen.

Twelve hours later.

The room was warm. A fire had been lit. People spoke quietly. The boy — ten, maybe eleven — sat stiffly in a heavy chair too large for him. His father had loosened his collar. They were guests, not soldiers. Old friends had greeted each other again, not as commanders, but as men. The boy's hands trembled, not from fear, but from the sheer weight of the moment. He sensed what this place meant. It was like stepping into a story — not the one from books, but one still being written.

The agent watched from behind the partition. Nobody noticed him yet. He listened.

Adolf was laughing. Not loudly. A quiet laugh. Something about bread. Something about a childhood memory. The boy asked a question. The room stilled. And Adolf knelt beside him, answered gently, like a teacher. Like an uncle.

The father — tall, tired, cautious — said nothing. But his shoulders relaxed. For the first time in years, he was speaking not to the symbol of a regime, but to a man he had once known. There was no security here. No posture. Just memory. Flesh and breath and presence.

The agent held his breath. He had imagined many versions of this scene. None like this. No simulations had predicted such softness. No protocol had written in a child's trembling lip. No mission brief had noted how human everyone might seem.

He looked toward the mountain slope. The target location — the rusted bolt on the upper rail of the cable car — was still visible through the upper window. One shot. One collapse. That had been the plan.

But now, he wasn't sure who the target even was. The bolt? The car? Adolf? The boy? The system?

His finger hovered near the hidden transmitter.

One press, and the meeting would be over. History would fracture along familiar lines. And he — he would go back to the archive. Or the pill. Or nothing.

Instead, he stepped into the light.

No one reached for a weapon. No one noticed at first. The boy saw him. And didn't flinch. He looked — and for a second, only a second — he smiled.

That moment should never have existed. It broke everything. It changed everything.

The observation center.

Cold light spilled over the consoles. The archivist and the judge leaned over the data streams — heat maps, spectral lines, shifting graphs.

“Gamma and Beta deviations. Twenty percent,” said the archivist without lifting his gaze.

“Tolerable?”

“For now. The agent’s in position. Target inside the strike zone.”

“Confirmed route?”

“Trajectory holds. No resistance expected. All parameters aligned.”

The judge nodded slowly, but his fingers tightened ever so slightly behind his back.

“Time?”

“Ten hours.”

The judge’s reflection flickered on the darkened glass panel. “Then for now, everything is... according to plan.”

He stayed silent for a while, watching the stream

of clean, calculated data — no interruptions, no spikes. Impeccable alignment. And yet it gnawed at him.

He left the room without speaking. Took the long way through the east wing, paused by the courtyard where white pebbles absorbed the midday haze. He listened to a few reports — none of which told him anything new — and only then returned to his chair. To his silence.

Doubt had settled beside him, not loudly — not yet — but insistently. It didn't scream. It asked questions. Quiet ones.

He couldn't voice them. Not here. Not now. That would mean undermining the system. But he could examine them. Probe them like a doctor checks an old scar — to see if it still hurts.

His eyes stayed on the screen. Not on the agent. On the structure. The system. The latticework of design built long before his time.

He hadn't built it. He inherited it. Along with the belief that it worked — always, automatically. But he had served long enough to see the cracks. Small ones. Subtle. But consistent. Persistent.

He had seen sectors where children drank from rusted pipes while elsewhere, neural grids anticipated demand before a request was even

made. He had seen truths disappear — not for protection, not for necessity, but simply because they did not serve the narrative.

That was no longer error. That was design.

Still, he did not speak in terms of justice. He spoke in terms of form. Structure. Balance. A judge does not seek what is good — he maintains what endures.

But even the most elegant structure bends, if it is never inspected. So, he allowed doubt. Measured, precise doubt. A pressure test. Not rebellion. Calibration.

He knew he wasn't alone in this. But he also knew how dangerous it was to assume others thought the same. Even the archivist — that old sentinel of fact — would not say it aloud. Yet he knew. That was enough.

The archivist lived by records. Not truth — not the raw kind — but the processed kind. The clean kind. The version that stays. That survives audits, reprints, historical revisions.

He'd cleansed the judge's words before. Removed emotion, trimmed implication. He did it not from malice, but because he understood: unpredictability is the enemy of design.

He served not truth, but order. And order was not peace. Order was engineered chaos — scripted, named, archived. He understood this better than most. Older than the judge, sharper perhaps. But he had chosen submission. Because submission preserved authority. And preservation was the only form of power that lasted.

He watched the agent not with concern — but curiosity. A living hypothesis. If the agent succeeds — a new doctrine is validated. If he fails — another variable logged.

That was the system. Every outcome was part of the order.

And that was the tragedy.

Because both the judge and the archivist knew: behind the words “target” and “event” were people. And behind the word “plan” — were lives.

But to acknowledge that aloud was disorder.

And order — order is everything.

The moment of truth

“They didn’t just change the location... they brought her *here*. To this house. *This* house — the one I was supposed to blow up. That’s not coincidence. That’s either a message or a mistake. Maybe both.”

He didn’t say it aloud. Just stared at the message on the PDA.

Deviation: 36%. Target geo-confirmed.... System analysis - complete.... Success rate: 99%. Brief summary...

He scrolled past it. The numbers meant nothing now. He was standing in the place where he was supposed to be a ghost — a silent function. An invisible hand pressing the trigger. A shadow that disappeared after the shot. But now he was here in person. In uniform. With a team.

The alpine lodge hadn’t changed. It still smelled like dust and oil. He knew this house like his own body. He’d memorized every knot in the floorboards. Every creak was part of his internal map. The secret panel under the kitchen tiles. The trapdoor in the bathroom. The reinforced supports that could collapse the entire structure. The fuse lines. The transmitter. The failsafe. He’d built it all.

Now he walked those halls in broad daylight. As if none of it was hidden. As if none of it mattered.

He pointed to the wooden panel in the east wing, just above the fireplace.

“Let’s check this.” His voice was flat. Calm. Too calm.

He pulled it open without hesitation. There it was — an old revolver, tucked behind a cloth bundle. Six bullets. Still where he left them.

He held the weapon up. Turned to the others.

“You missed this. Not great, for a team that said it cleared the building.”

A laugh. Nervous. Someone mumbled something about oversight. A junior officer nodded too quickly. Another one called him sharp. A natural.

He smiled on cue. Inside, he felt ill.

He was *performing*. Pretending to discover something he'd hidden himself. Wearing a role like a mask. Following protocol in a house that had no place for rules anymore. Not now. Not with her coming.

And for the first time in years, he realized: he wasn't in control.

Not of the space. Not of the team. Not even of himself.

He was a function, yes — but not a clean one. Not anymore.

The system kept telling him everything was within limits. That success was likely. That all variables were accounted for.

But something had already broken.

He was still walking. Still nodding. Still saying the right things.

But inside, a tremor had started. And it wasn't going to stop.

30 minutes to the deadline

The house pulsed with movement. Servants, aides, staff rotated through rooms like silent clockwork. But the quiet rhythm of routine couldn't mask the tension that coiled beneath every step. Thirteen people had gathered. The target was here. The host — the initiator of this whole meeting — stood at the center of it all. Watching. Everyone waited for his signal. No one spoke out of turn.

Adolf turned away from the tall window. A trace of weariness behind his forced brightness.

"Weather's just right today. We should get some air. Maybe shoot a few rounds?"

The room shifted. Chuckles, nods. Relief masquerading as approval. An adjutant leapt to his feet and ran off. He returned quickly with a rifle, proud and eager.

The agent's chest tightened.

He had hoped—almost believed—that this would be avoided. If only he hadn't found that rifle yesterday. If only he had left it buried. But now the moment took shape, unstoppable. The group was already moving toward the backwoods.

The planned detonation — cancelled. The scenario — erased.

The agent knelt beside the child and offered him a toy:

"Here, commander. Take this. Just don't lose it. All right?"

A plastic replica. Genetically locked. In the child's hands, it was harmless. Looked like a toy Walther — that was the point.

The boy's father took the gift, flipped it over, then passed it to Adolf. He studied it for barely a moment, then handed it to one of the officers. The officer inspected it with more care: toggled the hammer, checked for a safety. He noticed the dummy barrel bridge. No open muzzle. He tapped the frame, saw the screws. It was a toy. A very good one — the kind he'd gladly give to his own son.

He returned it to the child.

But the boy was already on the verge of tears.

"Last time they took my dagger... and didn't give it back," he whispered, clinging to the weapon.

The mood shifted again. This time, softened. A room full of uniforms — now watching a child plead for his imaginary authority.

That pause — barely a few seconds — was enough.

The agent shifted, slid his hand beneath his coat, and transferred the real pistol. Closer. Warmer. In reach.

This was no toy. Model: Equalizer. Skin: Walther — flawless down to the serial number.

Effective range: fifty meters through armor. One-fifty for soft targets. Clean. Final. A whisper of the future in a frame from 1932. And now it sat in his pocket.

Waiting. The woods were quiet ahead.

Somewhere inside him, something began to shake.

Deadline

Everything was on schedule on the monitors. Only one parameter was off: the gamma flux deviation. 36%. That was high. Above normal.

The target is in the kill zone. The agent is in direct line of sight. Time is ticking.

The main thing is that everything must happen *when* it's supposed to. Not a second later.

The system is monitoring. The archivist has already begun recording the protocol. The judge is watching. Day X is just a few minutes away.

THE HUNT

They left the house casually, unannounced — as if going for a stroll. But nothing about it followed protocol. Adolf moved ahead with a rifle slung across his shoulder. Relaxed. Light-footed. Almost... boyish. Behind him walked the boy's father — the same man who once wore an officer's coat, now merely a man full of dangerous ideas.

No guards surrounded them. No eyes on the agent. The officers had scattered. Informality turned into vulnerability, and that meant only one thing: chaos.

The agent stayed close, unseen but present. He tracked the angle of sunlight. The crunch of gravel under boots. The way Adolf raised his chin to the wind. Everything felt like a test — but no longer one designed by the agency.

Then the father spoke.

"Right now," he said, slow and deliberate, "there are many who are already dissatisfied. Not the enemy. Our own. We wanted socialism,

unity... not war with the world. But I understand — without power, we will be devoured. This is a strange world. Everyone sees everything. And yet no one moves. If not us — then who?”

His voice didn’t tremble. It cracked open something much deeper: a plea. Then — almost whispering:

“Don’t build camps. Don’t open that door. It was meant for something else. We can be strong without being monsters. Once they have their promised land — perhaps they will stop fighting. Perhaps they’ll rest.”

Adolf said nothing.

He scanned the treetops.

His rifle still slung. Silent. Listening.

“The Soviets are rearming. Yes. But a blitz — swift, surgical — might make them talk. The war, not to conquer, but to force peace. We strike. Then we talk. Return some of the land. Offer them a pact. Pull Japan in. Give China room to grow. Balance, Adolf. That’s real victory — not ash, but symmetry. You could be the match that sparks a chain reaction of restraint.”

Then, with a crooked smile:

“And old age... Maybe you’ll spend it in Argentina. Quiet. Unbothered. Unless the repression machine keeps running. Then the first candidates — me, my son, our neighbors — and maybe me again. For saying this out loud.”

The agent’s hands clenched inside his coat. His vision blurred for a second. He checked the time.

Thirty minutes late.

The shot should’ve happened.

The target should be dead.

But instead...

He listened. Frozen.

Each word another fragment in a puzzle the system never accounted for. A ripple in the predictive model.

His vision locked onto mission profile... One shot. But who? No

noise. Clean extraction.

These were not the words of a tyrant. Not yet.

These were the words of men standing on the edge — staring down into the abyss, asking themselves: *Should we jump? Or step back?*

He exhaled sharply. The trees were silent.

System error.

Further prediction: impossible.

Deviation rate: 99%.

Mission success: 99%.

Two numbers. Same probability.

The child's laughter rang in the distance. Not yet.

System

It had been 45 minutes past the deadline. The observation room was quiet, save for the subtle hum of active systems and the occasional flicker of data.

The judge sat still; eyes fixed on the main panel. His expression was neutral, but the silence was weighted.

“Deviation at 99.3%. Still within bounds?” he asked without turning his head.

The archivist responded instantly, his voice calm and clinical:

“Standard threshold is 22. Intervention flag at 27. Agent exceeded both. The probability of completion still reads 99%. Data is stable now.”

The judge tapped a note into his pad. He didn’t look surprised — only focused.

“Same deviation profile as the agent’s baseline drift pattern?”

“Exactly matched. Pulse and action lag mirror the signature we observed 12 hours ago. Back then, the drift was misclassified — thought to be a display bug. We now believe it was a predictive echo.”

The judge leaned forward. On the screen, the graphs showed a complete flattening — deviation lines converged. For a while, they’d been erratic, stuck in a looped animation that refused to update. The system hadn’t responded. Until now.

The archivist continued, almost reluctantly:

“Deviation peaked, but the system reprocessed the final sequence and accepted the timeline shift. No conflict flagged. It’s logged as a valid alternate completion. Mission marked as successful.”

The judge closed his eyes for a second. Then opened them again.

“Confirmation?”

A soft beep answered. A green light pulsed once.

“Confirmed,” said the archivist.

The judge stood and moved closer to the panel.

For the third time under his watch, a mission had gone this far off script. And yet, the system accepted the result. Not as an error — but as the new baseline.

He spoke quietly, more to himself than to the archivist:

“It wasn’t what we planned. But the structure held.”

Then louder:

“Begin backtrace analysis. And prepare the report. Internal tier first. Keep the raw logs intact.”

He didn’t need to say it twice.

They both knew something changed.

But whether it was the timeline, the agent — or the system itself was still unclear.

"Aquamarine Sky: To Each His Own"

worthy.

A child, around 10 or maybe 13, removed his VR headset and stared blankly ahead. His face was young but tired, as if he'd seen too many endings that didn't satisfy.

"The graphics are great," he muttered, "but the plot is crap. 1930s again. Why? I'd rather go to 2008. Or 2121."

He had just completed a mission set in that strange, distant past — a time of shadows and hard decisions. He'd completed the objective. Eliminated the target. It had all gone smoothly. Too smoothly. There was no thrill, no depth, only simulated consequence and a hollow aftertaste.

What bothered him most, though, was the silence — the silence after the mission.

There were no ads. No pop-ups. No distractions. Since the Reform, intrusive advertising had been banned across all neural-interactive media. It was deemed harmful to cognition. Efficient. Clean. Boring.

"Nicholas..."

The voice came from the living room. Calm, steady, fatherly.

"Yes, Dad," the boy replied, still pulling off the sensor band from his temple.

Alex, the boy's father, had paused in his drawing. He was tracing engine parts on a scrap of clean paper — something about his hands needed to create, even after a long shift.

He looked up and smiled faintly, not disapproving, not warm either — something in between. "You know, I've been a welder all my life. High-rises, hydro plants, streetlights. Since the change, it's been

quieter. More peaceful. Still not easy — we do side work, you and I — fixing electronics, running the car wash.”

“And you play games,” he added, not without irony.

Nicholas didn’t even flinch. “Dad, it’s Saturday. You’re sketching because you enjoy it. I play because I enjoy it.”

“You’ve been playing a long time, son,” Alex said. But his voice was softer now. Not a scolding — a recognition.

“Alex, Nicholas,” came a voice from the kitchen — Marie, always in motion. “Someone needs to go to the store. We forgot a few things for dinner.”

“Yes, Mom. Just give me the list.”

“No, train your memory or write it down: mineral water for the morning, a bag of red vegetables, red semi-dry — you know which, bread, and a few energy drinks.”

“Got it.” Nicholas stood. “I’ll go now.”

Alex watched him leave the room and lingered on a thought. Was it pride? Was it worry? The boy always answered his mother with respect — not obedience, but something gentler. In another era, someone might’ve called that weak. Now, who could say what strength meant? Once, being gentle was frowned upon. In other places, it could cost a woman her life just to raise her voice. Civilization still lived in uneven patches across the world.

His thoughts drifted — warm and cold at once.

He remembered meeting Marie. Her awkward laugh. Her hands, always busy. How she had stopped being an engineer and become a seamstress, not out of failure but out of sheer devotion to keeping their life intact. Together, they had built something small — honest, flawed, but real.

They had no illusions. The world wasn’t fair. But at least, now, it was quiet enough to breathe.

And then — the bell rang. Not loud, but sharp.

Nicholas rushed to the door. On the other side was a tired courier with a food bag — likely an order the boy had placed earlier, opting

to skip the store altogether. Standing beside the courier was a tall, slightly disheveled man in a coat that didn't fit well. It was Dantes.

Nicholas took the package and disappeared toward the kitchen. The courier said nothing, but something in his face sparked recognition.

Dantes lingered at the entrance. "Did you see that?"

Alex frowned. "See what?"

"The courier. That was the former president."

There was a pause.

Alex blinked, and then — bitterly, reflexively: "He got what he deserved. Promised a future — delivered one, sure, just not for us."

Dantes raised an eyebrow. "Maybe. But we're still building on his foundations."

"Foundations made of shit and sticks," Alex shot back. "You can see the rot better when you're standing on it."

"Then we'll replace them with something stronger," Dantes said, and that was that.

"Walk?" Alex offered.

"Later. I brought drinks," Dantes replied, holding up a jingling bag.

"Let's eat first."

Alex took the bag, amused, and turned toward the kitchen.

"Dantes, you know..." Alex began, almost monologuing. "You were always a bit of a slacker. People called you a drone. Always watching others, giving advice no one asked for. But look at you now — analyst-manager, part of the new cabinet. Turns out people like you — people who see patterns — are exactly what we needed."

The door knocked again. Another pause. A rhythm was building in the air.

"I'll get it," Dantes said.

At the door stood Olaf. Eyes wide. Face pale. He looked like he'd seen a ghost or something close to it.

He didn't speak — just looked past them into the apartment, as if trying to comprehend how something so significant could happen in

such an ordinary place.

Alex and Dantes exchanged a glance. Dantes stepped aside.

“Olaf, come in. We’ll have tea. You look like hell.”

Alex handed him a bag and gently pulled him inside.

“All right,” Olaf muttered, stepping in. “You convinced me.”

No one said it aloud, but they all felt it — this was not an ordinary visit. Something was shifting.

In this plain apartment, under dim light, three men sat down, unknowingly carrying the weight of an era. Not heroes. Not villains. Just people. But people through whom the world would bend — slightly, then suddenly.

At the Table.

Everyone gathers around the large kitchen table. Marie decorates the table, not for show, but for herself, because she knows that it's more comfortable to sit in a beautiful place. The others bring the remaining dishes from the kitchen. Alex takes everything out of his bag and puts it on the bar. There is wine, which Marie loves so much, their favorite gin, some strong alcohol—today it is rum, and not just any rum, but coconut rum. The bag also contains pineapples, juice, and snacks.

At first, the conversation is polite and calm, covering general topics. Dantes, as the official “observer” of the neighborhood, asks how the family is doing.

Alex and Marie talk about their lives, not complaining, but speaking frankly:

Marie dreams, “If we had some free space nearby, I would open my own shop—a clothing repair studio. I sew at home and have plenty of customers, but I want something of my own...”

Alex adds that he and his son and neighbors have an initiative: “Nikita and I have already provided half the neighborhood with technical assistance—fixing irons, tuning antennas. With some mechanic friends from the factory, we run a small car wash. It doesn't bring in much money, but it's convenient for people. We're thinking about starting our own repair and maintenance service—that would be great!”

Dantes nods, listening attentively and discreetly taking notes on his tablet. He is here both as a friend and as a worker, gathering information about local needs. In the new system of government, such conversations are not empty formalities: residents' ideas are taken into consideration. Alex and Marie, however, are not talking for personal gain. They know that Dantes could help with a loan or project approval, but more importantly, they want to share ideas that could improve life in the district. In their world, decisions are made collectively: officials like Dantes do not give orders, but

advise and guide, leaving the final say to the people.

The conversation turns to recent changes. Nikita recalls how advertising disappeared from his life immediately after the change of government: “At first it was so strange—no billboards, no online videos, no pop-up banners. But now there’s nothing to distract you in games. It’s a bit boring, but my head really feels less tired,” he admits.

Dantes smiles: the elimination of intrusive advertising was one of the first decisions made by the new administration. Studies had shown that advertising noise was harmful to people’s concentration and mental health.

“But now, they say, schoolchildren’s grades have improved—they’re not distracted by trivial things,” notes Marie, pouring tea for her guests.

The conversation gradually moves on to more general topics. Alex asks Dantes about his work. He explains that managers now operate differently: “We plan not for a year, but for millennia ahead. And we rely on data. My job is to listen to people, study reports, look for problems and areas for growth. Remember when you complained about the leaky roof? Well, the whole neighborhood was repaired after you reported it, but you didn’t know who passed on the information.”

Alex looks surprised. Indeed, a few months ago, their old neighborhood, which hadn’t been repaired in 30 years, was suddenly cleaned up by the municipal services. At the time, he wondered why they were suddenly so concerned.

Dantes winks: “That’s why we needed people like me—observers. They used to think we were freeloaders, but it turns out that watching and thinking is also work.”

Olaf listens silently, clutching his cup tightly. Contradictory emotions flash across his face—skepticism, regret. Gradually, stronger drinks appear on the table, and the conversation becomes franker and louder.

After downing a shot, Olaf can’t hold back: he interrupts Alex, who is talking about his plans, and interjects sarcastically:

“Work, you say. So, while we were slaving away, you, Dantes, were looking around. Now look at you—you’ve got yourselves into power, and the people on whose backs you built everything are now delivering food.” He puts his glass down on the table a little harder than necessary. “Where’s the justice? They pulled the country out of crisis while you were handing out advice! And now what? Chaos, vagrants on the streets, shootings... People were like animals, and they remain so, only they lacked advertising, you see!”

Olaf’s voice clearly betrayed the former president, with resentment and biting sarcasm.

Silence reigns at the table. Marie bites her lip. Nikita watches the scene intently, as if it were another episode of a game. Alex frowns but remains silent, allowing his friend to respond.

Dantes, although surprised, keeps his negative feelings to himself. Calmly, lowering his voice, he replies to Olaf:

“Yes, I watched. And I’m watching now—it’s my job. I listen to you, I remember, I draw conclusions. You, Olaf, are not silent either—or that’s good. If there is a grain of truth in what you say, we will use it. You talk about justice... But was it fair when people were begging and those who disagreed were silenced? Yes, things aren’t perfect now. Not everyone accepted the changes right away: there were shootings and chaos. But we got through it. There are homeless people, and there is still destruction in some places. But no one is burying their head in the sand anymore. We know about every problem, and everyone will be solved.”

Dantes pauses and stares intently at Olaf. “You say they pulled the country out of the mire... Maybe they tried. But their methods—force, orders, secret propaganda—no longer work. Do you know why?

Now everyone has an AI assistant in their ear that immediately reveals who you are and what you want. It’s hard to deceive people. Remember those crooks and “gray cardinals” who ran things from the shadows? They’ve all been blown away. The people simply stopped listening to them—they are untouchable. Some former politicians, big narcissists, are still hanging around in public—they’ve become actors or bloggers, just to get attention. And those

who secretly plotted behind the scenes have nowhere to go they've hidden in their holes like lizards under rocks, sitting there with no influence. The system of lies has collapsed, and we are building a new one—an open one.”

Olaf blushes: “Yeah, open... And they wrote them off, right? Scrap them—go work as a courier if you want to live. Great justice,” he sneers. The alcohol is clearly going to his head: he's become too candid. “You observers... drones... you thought I didn't notice? You walked around me, writing reports about how I ate and sneezed. Yeah, you miscalculated them... You got rid of them. And what, did you bring order? As far as I'm concerned, it's still a mess. You fight for ideas, but people are still animals. Give them free rein and they'll tear each other apart. No wonder your smart guys on TV said that half the population are Neanderthals, and some are even reptiles!”

Olaf waves his arm, almost knocking over the saltshaker. “So what? They opened our eyes, but these ‘reptiles’ would have killed us and run away to hide. Instinct rules the world, gentlemen, and you're here playing at a bright future...”

Olaf's monologue reveals his pent-up bitterness. The atmosphere at the table becomes heated: it seems that a scandal is inevitable. Dantes frowns and presses his lips together, while Marie hurriedly clears the extra bottles from the table. Alex finally says quietly but firmly, “Enough,” trying to calm Olaf down before he says something he'll regret. There's a tense pause.

Suddenly, a chuckle breaks the silence.

It's Nikita. The teenager can't take it anymore and snorts, looking at the arguing adults with irony: “Arguing about nonsense... Who worked, who watched... What's the point?” He gets up from the table. “Come on, give it up. Your serious people, and you're arguing over nonsense!” Nikita puts the VR headset back on his head. “If that's the case, then I guess now I'm watching you. So, I'm an observer of observers?” he says.

At that moment, an interface appears in Nikita's field of vision with the words: “Welcome to the third level.” Bright holographic indicators flash for a moment in the window next to Olaf, as if some kind of augmented reality app has been launched around the table.

Marie gasps—either in surprise or perhaps because she understands the hidden meaning. Dantes remains silent, trying to assess the boy's joke. Olaf turns to the reflection in the window and freezes: not only their figures are flashing in the glass, but also some strange symbols, as if someone is really watching them through the lens of an invisible camera.

Another glance.

Nikita laughs and immediately takes off his glasses, turning off the game interface that had appeared. His antics defuse the situation. The adults come to their senses: Dantes shakes his head with a smile, Alex grunts something like “Youth...” and Marie puts a cup of tea in front of her son: “Enough playing, sit down with us, philosopher.” Olaf, however, is still staring out the window, where only the reflection of the room has returned. His face is confused. Perhaps a recent thought is floating through his mind: it seems like someone has been watching me this whole time.

Olaf slowly sinks back into his chair. There is no trace of his former bravado. He thoughtfully twirls the empty mug in his hands. “You know...” he begins haltingly after a pause. “I’m a courier too. Yes, I wasn’t fired. I agreed to it myself. I wanted to... see how it would all end.” He looks up at Dantes and Alex. “I’m like a probe, gathering your opinions and moods. I observe people and then report back to ‘where it needs to go.’” Olaf smirks: “Like now — I arrive, I look, I listen. Formally, I brought food, but I’m checking out the situation...”

Dantes smiles gently: “We know,” he says quietly. For the family, Olaf’s admission is nothing new — everyone understands without words. Alex spreads his arms: “Everyone’s job is different... It’s okay, what can you do?” Marie shakes her head sympathetically. Nikita looks at Olaf with new interest, as if he were a character in a complex game who has finally revealed his secret.

Finally, Dantes raises a toast: he pours everyone a last drop and proclaims, “Here’s to everyone finding themselves in a new world. And may the observers and the observed all work together, honestly, for the future.” Alex agrees and clinks glasses; Marie smiles and raises her mug of tea as well. Olaf hesitates slightly, but then, gathering himself, clinks his glass with the others. “To the future... let’s see what it will be like,” he says quietly.

The conversation gradually returns to a peaceful tone. Olaf asks Alex about his family without sarcasm, Marie offers the courier

some pie, Dantes jokes, recalling funny incidents from his childhood when Olaf and Alex went to the same school, and it is mentioned in passing that they also crossed paths at one time. The window shows a dark sky and the lights of a sleeping neighborhood.

However, the feeling that someone is watching over this cozy kitchen remains. Nikita steals a glance at the VR helmet, which is turned off: a notification icon flashes on its display, the game is waiting for him to return. Olaf finishes his tea and looks at the glass again. He thinks he sees a faint reflection of text — maybe his son’s game, or maybe just his drunken imagination. He squints, trying to make out the words. In the reflection opposite Olaf’s face, the words “Observation complete. Loading data...” appear semi-transparent. Olaf blinks — the inscription disappears. He sighs heavily and looks away.

People are laughing at the table, their recent grievances forgotten. A former president, a current official “observer,” a simple worker with a family—such different fates, brought together in one room, trying to understand each other.

Somewhere in the background, a radio plays softly, mumbling the news of the day. “...the Echo neuroservice has completed collecting suggestions from citizens. The government has announced the launch of a program to develop the regions...” comes from the speaker, confirming that everything said today will be put into action.

Olaf, as if stepping outside himself, sees himself slowly moving away from the other side of the window, leaving the heroes behind the curtain. A thought won’t leave his mind: someone, somewhere, on an even higher level, is watching the whole scene. After all, if there is an observer of observers, then perhaps there is a fourth circle...

"Aquamarine Sky: The 13th Circle"

The Adventure of Bimbalf the Wise.

It was a moonless night, and the darkness lay thick and heavy in the ruins of a roadside tavern. The Merchant crept behind the Sage, trying to step lightly, but every rotten floorboard betrayed him with a shrill creak. A damp smell of mold mingled with the stale tang of burned-down candles, and it seemed that even the shadows clinging to the warped beams were steeped in an ancient fear. Clutching the strap of his satchel with trembling fingers, the Merchant kept close to his venerable companion. When something rustled in the far corner, he froze mid-step, heart pounding in his throat.

"Calm yourself," the Sage whispered over his shoulder. Though his voice was low and weary, it carried a note of quiet confidence that steadied the Merchant's nerves. In one hand the old man raised an iron lantern, and its feeble orange glow danced in a semicircle across the walls, sending grotesque shadows lunging across the floor. The Sage's other hand rested on a knotted wooden staff, and his silhouette—tall and cloaked—loomed reassuringly ahead. On the Sage's shoulder perched Canary, a diminutive yellow bird and his constant companion. The tiny creature fluffed its feathers against the chill, peering into the gloom with beady black eyes and letting out a single displeased chirp.

The Merchant recalled the eerie rumors whispered about that little bird. They said restless spirits feared Canary more than an open flame, and that a single shriek from her tiny throat could scatter a whole flock of ghosts like smoke on the wind. Some even claimed

that if anyone dared threaten the Canary or those under her protection, she would transform into a six-winged terror: spikes would sprout from her wings, and she would rain down barbs of despair upon her foes. Those unlucky enough to be struck by such enchanted quills would not die, or so the stories went, but instead would sink into a living stupor of melancholy and apathy from which no escape was possible until the Canary willed it. A few whispered that this unassuming bird could even take the shape of a dragon if ever she were enraged beyond all reason. Stealing a furtive glance at the cheerful yellow creature on the Sage's shoulder, the Merchant found it hard to believe—now she was preening her feathers and warbling a soft tune as if without a care. Could this really be the legendary being of so many wild tales? He dared not ask aloud. Legend or not, Canary was undeniably real, and she was right in front of him, watching over them in the tavern's dark heart.

"Hallo! Is anyone here?" the Sage called into the darkness, stepping forward across the sagging floor. His lantern's glow swept across an overturned trestle table and a row of dusty bottles behind the bar but revealed no living soul—only the wind moaning through a cracked windowpane answered his call. Canary suddenly took wing, leaving the Sage's shoulder to circle under the tavern's soot-stained rafters. The Merchant held his breath as that tiny yellow blur darted into every shadowy nook. All at once, the bird gave a sharp, piercing cry. In the same instant, two small points of yellow light flickered to life beneath the staircase across the room. Eyes!

"Back!" the Merchant yelped, stumbling as he staggered away from the stairs. In the wavering lantern-light, a hunched shadow the size of a large hound detached itself from the darkness. A guttural hiss echoed through the tavern. Low to the ground, the thing skittered forward on all fours, and at last the lantern's glow fell upon it. It was some malevolent spirit or demanding, with a withered grey body and limbs as gaunt and long as a spider's. Its feet and hands were webbed like a bat's wings, and its lipless mouth hung open in a slavering grin, black drool dripping onto the floorboards. Eyes like coals smoldered at the intruders, filled with mindless hunger and hate. This creature must have been lurking here for ages, haunting the abandoned tavern—and now it perceived fresh prey had

wandered into its lair.

The Sage raised his free hand calmly, as though casting a pinch of sand into the air. A soft whisper sounded—perhaps a word of power, or perhaps just a sudden hush of the air. In an instant, the lunging spirit halted as though ensnared in an invisible web. It gave a strangled cry, limbs twitching, and then collapsed to the floor with a dull thud, curled into an unconscious ball.

“Is it...dead?” the Merchant whispered, creeping forward but keeping a wary distance. “Only asleep,” the Sage replied in an assured tone. “It will slumber for a time and awake none the wiser, with no memory of our passing.” Canary alighted atop the back of a broken chair and clicked her beak in obvious disappointment. “Humph! As usual, you’ve spoiled my fun, old man,” she chirped in a clear, tinkling voice. “I could have finished off that nasty thing in the blink of an eye!”

The Merchant’s jaw dropped Canary was speaking! In all his travels with the Sage, he had seen uncanny things, yet this small bird never failed to amaze him. The Sage gave a gentle, tired smile. “At least no one was harmed—not even that poor creature.” Canary ruffled her feathers and let out a little huff of a sigh but said nothing more. The Merchant exhaled slowly and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. It seemed the danger had passed, at least for now.

That night, as the hours crept toward dawn, the Merchant dozed fitfully in a corner of the tavern, wrapped in his threadbare cloak. In his uneasy sleep, a vivid dream seized hold of him. He found himself trudging down an endless corridor littered with doorways. With each step he took, doors on either side would bang open and slam shut, and behind them he could hear snatches of whispering voices and distant laughter. Cold water sloshed about his ankles, and when he looked down, he saw the floor was flooded. He was clutching a heavy leather satchel filled to bursting with glittering gems. Coins kept spilling from gashes in the satchel’s bottom, ringing out as they hit the water and rolled away into the darkness behind him. Panicked at the loss of his precious wares, he dropped to his knees and frantically tried to gather the escaping coins. But as

he did, he realized to his horror that the water had turned to thick black mud, sucking him down. Pale, bony hands rose up from the mire and clutched at his legs, their touch ice-cold. A chorus of rasping voices echoed around him, whispering, “Stay with us... stay... forever...”

The Merchant opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. He struggled vainly, trying to pull free from the mud and grasping hands. Up ahead, at the very end of the corridor, he could see a single torch burning. A distant silhouette stood in that flickering light—perhaps the Sage come to rescue him? The Merchant reached out an arm toward the light, mustering all his strength to cry for help, but only a broken croak escaped his throat. Suddenly a sharp pain lanced through his shoulder. A great coal-black raven had descended onto him, its talons digging cruelly into his flesh. The bird’s eyes glowed like hot embers as it stared into his face. Then the raven slowly inclined its head, opened its beak, and spoke in a harsh, human voice: “Wake up... wake up!”

With a gasp, the Merchant jolted awake. He was back in the tavern’s corner, his cloak tangled around him. The first weak light of dawn was filtering through the broken window. Canary was fluttering above him, gently batting his forehead with her wings to rouse him. Heart racing, he took a moment to catch his breath and shake off the lingering tendrils of the nightmare. The Sage stood by the doorway, lantern in hand, peering out into the greying forest. It was time to move on.

Under a pale aquamarine sky at dawn, the three travelers left the ruined tavern behind and followed a winding road out of the forest. As the trees thinned, they stepped onto an open plain shrouded in low grey mist. Boulders of bizarre shape jutted up from the earth here and there, looming like giant petrified beasts half-hidden by the haze. Wild grasses as tall as a man brushed against them, each blade tipped with silvery dew. Now and then a ghostly firefly drifted past, its glow fading as morning grew brighter. With the coming of daylight, the terrors of the night before seemed to melt away. The Merchant drew in a lungful of the cool air and managed a smile. This strange land was eerie, yes, but in the dawn light he

could also appreciate its melancholy beauty.

A sudden shout shattered the morning calm. “Hey, you three—halt right there!” a rough voice cried. Five short, stocky figures leapt out from behind the misty boulders, fanged grins flashing beneath small, upturned noses. Goblins. Each wore bits of crude armor and waved a rusty dagger in the air. In a heartbeat the goblins had encircled the travelers. Their leader, a particularly stout specimen with a jagged scar across his cheek and a moth-eaten brocade vest stretched over his mail, stepped forward. “Turn yourselves around, humans,” he snarled. “This is our territory. The toll for passing through...” He ran a yellowed tongue over his pointed teeth. “...is one fat bag of gold per head. Especially for that hunchbacked fellow there.” He jabbed his blade toward the Merchant, who stiffened indignantly—he wasn’t hunchbacked, just stooped under the weight of his pack!

Before the Merchant could respond, Canary gave a little trill of laughter. “Oh my, you really don’t value your life very highly, do you, little one?” she chimed at the goblin chief. Her tiny voice was almost sweet, but the goblins around them drew back a step in sudden fear. They had heard tales of a talking yellow bird with uncanny powers. One of the goblin underlings leaned and whispered hoarsely, “It’s her... the one in yellow...” The knife in his warty hand trembled. Even the leader’s bravado faltered; he glanced uncertainly from the bird to the cloaked old man and the travel-worn Merchant.

Though the goblins hesitated, the air still hung ripe with the threat of violence. The Merchant caught the Sage’s eye and saw that his companion stood calm but ready. In another moment, Canary would no doubt unleash havoc upon these unfortunate bandits, leaving them weeping like scolded children. There had to be a better way to resolve this standoff. Summoning every ounce of his courage, the Merchant stepped forward and raised his open hands peaceably. “Good sirs,” he called out, mustering a polite smile, “there is no need for bloodshed. I’m sure we can reach a mutual agreement.”

The goblin chief narrowed his beady eyes. “Oh, can we now?” he sneered. “And what do you suggest, Merchant? If you’ve no gold, perhaps you’ll pay with your lives—or your souls?” His cohorts cackled at this crude jest. The Merchant swallowed hard but managed to keep his tone light. “My soul isn’t for sale today,” he answered. “However, I do have goods to trade, treasures from far-off human kingdoms. For example, I carry some of the finest steel knives ever forged by mortal blacksmiths—each one sharp enough to shave a dragon’s whiskers. You won’t find their equal in these parts. What if I offered you a dozen such blades in exchange for safe passage? That, and perhaps a swig of good spirits to seal our newfound friendship?”

The leader’s pointed ears twitched at the word *steel*. He eyed the large pack the Merchant bore. “Show me these blades,” he demanded gruffly.

Moving slowly so as not to startle them, the Merchant knelt and unstrapped his wooden traveling chest. He lifted its lid to reveal rows of well-crafted hunting knives, each wrapped in oilcloth and glinting keenly. The goblins pressed forward, peering in with hungry awe. “Real steel...” one muttered, nearly dropping his dagger in astonishment. Trying to recover his bluster, the chief grunted, “They’ll do. Fine, human, you have a deal. But leave the blades and be on your way.” He tossed the Merchant a lumpy leather pouch. “Here’s a token of our... hospitality.”

The Merchant caught the pouch and opened it curiously. Inside was a jumble of oddments: a handful of tarnished silver coins, a brass compass cracked down the middle, a tangle of jewelry that looked to be elven craft, and other bits of curious junk—no doubt the most precious trinkets the goblins had collected. He hid a smile; what meant little to them might fetch a fair price elsewhere. “Thank you kindly,” he said. He produced a flat flask from his pack and offered it to the goblin leader. “And here, good sir—spiced mead from my homeland. Let us part as friends, with a toast to your health.”

The goblin chieftain, already gloating over the steel blades, was taken slightly aback by the Merchant's unexpected courtesy. Nonetheless, he snatched the flask and uncorked it. He sniffed the contents and then allowed himself a snaggle-toothed grin. "Perhaps we will drink to that," he allowed. He barked at his underlings, and the goblins quickly gathered up their new knives and loot. "Be off with you now, humans," growled the chief, not unkindly. "And maybe we'll meet again under more... profitable circumstances." Trying to maintain a fierce facade, he added in a warning tone, "No tricks now, or next time even your little bird won't save you." But the effect was undermined by the way his eyes gleamed with excitement over the fine steel weaponry.

The band of goblins trotted off, jabbering to each other in their guttural tongue about the fortune they'd stumbled upon. When they were a safe distance away, Canary fluttered down and gave the Merchant a playful peck on the ear. "Well, well, Master Merchant," she chirped brightly. "Not bad at all! Already turning highway robbery into a business transaction." The Merchant laughed in relief, rubbing his ear. "I figured it was better than getting into a fight. A fair trade is easier on everyone." The Sage nodded approvingly. "Every traveler chooses his own methods," he said. "And yours proved the wisest this day."

By that evening, the road delivered them to the outskirts of a bustling settlement. At a bend in the road stood a weathered wooden sign carved in flowing script: **WELCOME TO THE THIRTEENTH CIRCLE – TRAVELERS, PREPARE FOR INSPECTION.** The Merchant raised his eyebrows at the peculiar name. "Thirteenth Circle? Is that what this place is called?" he asked.

The Sage gave a knowing little smile. "The world, it is said, is laid

out in twelve great circles of lands, like concentric rings spreading outward from a single center. This place, the Thirteenth Circle, lies beyond those: a crossroads realm, a kind of border-market between worlds. All roads from all corners of creation eventually bend to meet here.”

As they approached the city gates, a pair of guards emerged to bar the way. The guards were tall, gaunt figures clad in black armor. Through their open-faced helms they appeared almost human, save that their heads were those of jackals, with long snouts and ears pricked upright. Each guard held a gleaming halberd that caught the last red rays of sunset. One stepped forward, voice echoing hollowly from behind sharp canine teeth: “Halt. State your names and purpose. And declare any magical items or forbidden artifacts in your possession.”

The Sage inclined his head respectfully. “Good sir, we are but weary travelers on our way to the Port of Other Worlds,” he said. “We carry no contraband. I have only my staff and this lantern, which are of purely practical use.” The Merchant nodded and opened his palms to show he held nothing threatening. Canary, perched upon the Sage’s shoulder once more, gave a tiny sleepy cheep.

The jackal-headed guard bent down to peer at the little bird. His amber eyes widened with recognition. “By the Twelve Circles...” he murmured, awestruck. “That canary... So, it’s true—you must be Canary.” He straightened at once and thumped a fist to his breastplate in salute. “Our apologies, honored travelers! Had we known it was you, we would have escorted you directly. I shall inform His Lordship the Governor at once that you have arrived in our land.”

At this the Merchant blinked in surprise. In the span of a day, he had gone from trembling before goblin bandits to being treated as an esteemed guest. The world truly was turning upside-down. The guards beckoned, and an honor guard of pale, ghostly soldiers appeared as if from the very shadows to escort the trio through the gates. Inside, the city of the Thirteenth Circle bustled with twilight activity. The streets were lit by glass globes of witch-light, and

beings of many descriptions hurried along market lanes—there were hooded specters bartering at spice stalls, and stout trolls carrying crates of ore, and even a few humans and elves intermingled among the crowd. Before long, the party arrived at the Governor’s mansion, an imposing structure of black stone with tall arched windows glowing from within. They crossed a polished floor of midnight-blue marble as silent phantom knights flanked their path, and soon found themselves in a grand candlelit hall.

Seated at the head of a long dining table was the Governor of the Thirteenth Circle himself. He was a horned demon of stately appearance, with skin the deep blue of a midnight sky and eyes that glinted with shrewd intelligence. He rose to his feet in welcome as the travelers entered. “Master! And Canary!” the Governor boomed in a warm, polished tone. “What an honor to receive such distinguished guests in my home. And who, pray, is your companion?” His gaze fell upon the Merchant, who bowed as gracefully as he could.

“I am, ah, called the Merchant, Your Lordship,” he said, voice a touch unsteady with awe. He felt decidedly out of place in this hall of nobles and spirits.

“Welcome to the Thirteenth Circle, Merchant,” the demon said genially, spreading his clawed hands. “Come, all of you—be seated and join me for supper. I am most eager to hear the tale of your journey. Surely it deserves to be celebrated with our finest ale.”

Servants pulled out high-backed chairs for the guests. As the Merchant sank into the plush seat, he marveled at the lavish spread laid out on the table: roast fowl glazed in honey, spiced curries, exotic fruits, and flagons of foaming ale that sent up a rich, yeasty aroma. Not long ago, he had been gnawing on hardtack by a campfire; now he was dining like a lord. It took him a few minutes to overcome his shyness, but the Governor was a practiced host, and soon conversation flowed easily.

While they ate, the Sage regaled the Governor with observations about the far-flung lands they had passed through, and the

Governor in turn recounted local news of the Thirteenth Circle. Gradually the Merchant joined in. He told them of the trade goods that were abundant in his homeland but rare in these parts: silks from the Eastern kingdoms, fragrant spices, tobacco leaves, fine grains and honey. The Governor's eyes gleamed with interest. "Your offerings tempt me, sir," he said. "Our swamps make poor soil for most crops, and I confess no looms here can rival the softness of true Eastern silk." He gestured to the rich tapestries adorning the hall—woven of good material but lacking that certain sheen of silk. "Perhaps we can come to an arrangement? If you can bring such luxuries through the portal, we will gladly trade from our own wealth. The gems you see decorating these walls, for instance."

The Merchant followed the sweep of the demon's claw. Ornate sconces of silver and gold held glowing crystal orbs, and inlays of opal and beryl studded the columns. He nodded eagerly. "It would be my pleasure to establish a trade pact, Your Lordship. I can arrange regular shipments of silk, spices, and all manner of produce in exchange for those beautiful opals and beryl's—stones the nobles of my world would prize dearly." At a signal from the Governor, one of his spectral aides glided forward with parchment and quill. Right then and there, by lamplight, they drafted the outlines of a grand trade agreement. The Merchant could hardly believe his fortune—this single deal would make him a wealthy man back home, and it would enrich the Thirteenth Circle as well.

Meanwhile, Canary had been offered a cup of her own—a little silver thimble filled with syrupy liqueur. She sipped it eagerly (perhaps a bit too quickly) and fluttered about near the rafters, chattering merrily. A gaggle of servants and minor courtiers soon gathered around to listen to the famous Yellow Canary's tales. The little bird did not disappoint with much dramatic flair she recounted how once, when provoked by a rather rude lord of ghosts, she had indeed assumed the form of a magnificent golden dragon and sent an entire phantom army scattering to the winds. Her audience gasped and applauded, utterly charmed.

The banquet was in full swing when a sudden hush fell across the hall. At a nod from the Governor, two guards dragged a shackled

figure into the center of the room. It was a pitiful specter of a being—a ragged, half-transparent spirit with sunken eyes that gleamed with madness. The temperature in the hall seemed to drop as all eyes turned to the spectacle. The Merchant set down his goblet uneasily, not sure what to expect.

The Governor rose, towering over the trembling prisoner. In a solemn voice he declared, “This spirit has been found guilty of breaking the laws of our realm. He stole the dreams of our citizens and sold them across the border. For such a crime, the sentence is banishment into a new cycle. Let this serve as a lesson to all.”

The Merchant's brow furrowed, but he remained silent. Canary, suddenly sober, fluttered down to perch on the Merchant's shoulder, tilting her head as she watched intently. The Merchant scarcely breathed. He had never witnessed an execution in that place before.

From beneath his embroidered robe, the demon Governor drew a massive sword. The weapon's blade was black as obsidian and etched with runes that glowed faintly. Despite its size, the Governor wielded it effortlessly. For a heartbeat, the hall was deathly still. Then the demon swung. Steel flashed in the candlelight. In one clean stroke, the great sword swept through the condemned spirit's neck. The phantom's head toppled to the marble floor and shattered like a glass orb, bursting into a mist of twinkling vapor. An eerie, bell-like chime echoed as the ghost's body disintegrated into wisps of smoke.

The Merchant felt the blood drain from his face. Even knowing this was a world of spirits and that “death” here might simply mean rebirth in another form, the sight of a living being so swiftly and coldly dispatched made his stomach churn. The Governor slid his sword back under his robe and resumed his seat, calm as if nothing of note had occurred. “Justice must be served impartially,” he said, addressing the silent hall. “But please, friends—do not let this little interruption sour the sweetness of our dessert. Eat, drink!”

At his signal, the servants hurried forward again with trays of

sugared berries and flaky pastries. The low murmurs of conversation gradually resumed, though a slight tension lingered in the air. The Merchant managed a few bites of a tart pie, which tasted of bitter blackberries and cream. Gradually he steadied himself. He realized that the hapless spirit had not been “killed” per se, only expelled—sent back into some sort of spiritual cycle to atone and perhaps to eventually return. It reminded him of how the Sage had put the tavern-demon to sleep rather than slaying it. Yet the dramatic finality of the execution still rattled him. He gulped a deep breath and tried to regain his composure.

The Governor lifted a crystal goblet, breaking into a genteel smile once more. “Now then,” he proclaimed, “a toast—to new alliances between our worlds!” Everyone—noble guests, ghostly courtiers, and the travelers themselves—raised their cups. The Merchant clicked his heavy tankard of ale against the Governor’s delicate goblet. They drank, and warmth spread through the Merchant’s veins, easing the lingering chill of what he had just witnessed.

The demon set down his glass and fixed the Merchant with a thoughtful look. “My dear Merchant,” he said, “may I offer you a piece of advice? You have a promising future in trade, that much is clear. But be cautious.” His voice, though civil, bore a grave undertone. “It is easy to mislay one’s conscience in the relentless pursuit of profit. Mark me: any bargain struck upon the suffering of the innocent will ultimately poison the soul of the one who profits. And no treasure—no heap of gold or gleaming gem—can ever compensate for a soul lost to darkness.”

A silence followed the Governor’s words. The Merchant felt an uncomfortable tightness in his throat, as if the demon’s gaze had laid his very intentions bare. He remembered, with a stab of guilt, the greedy excitement he’d felt upon inking the new trade contract moments ago. He glanced toward Sage, who was regarding him with a calm, unreadable expression, as though waiting to see what he took from this lesson. Even Canary, perched nearby on a candlestick, gave a soft cackle. “Yes, yes, we hear you, O wise Governor!” she chirruped brightly. “No cheating the innocent—our Merchant will behave himself.”

Laughter rippled around the table; the tension broken. The company took the Canary's cheeky interjection as the harmless teasing of a tipsy bird. The Merchant managed a weak chuckle as well, though in truth the demon's counsel had pierced him deeply. He silently vowed then and there to remember these words of warning in the days to come.

Later that night, after the feast had ended, the Merchant was preparing to retire to the luxurious guest chamber provided for him. Before he could reach the stairs, a stooped figure in an old-fashioned pinstripe suit slid out of the shadows and approached him with a courteous bow. The fellow was short and barrel-shaped, with a face rather like an owl—large round eyes, a sharp little nose, and a head that he cocked inquisitively to one side. "Pardon me, sir," the owl-faced stranger said in a low, oily voice. "Might I have a word? I could not help overhearing that you are a merchant of some repute."

The Merchant, feeling pleasantly drowsy from food and drink, returned the bow. "You heard correctly," he said. "How may I be of service?"

The man's eyes glittered. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am an associate of His Lordship's court—some call me an advisor, others a facilitator of special trades. And I have a proposition for you, one that promises considerable profit to both of us." He leaned in slightly and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Tell me, have you ever heard of *nightmare concentrate*?"

"Nightmares... as in bad dreams?" the Merchant asked, puzzled.

“Precisely,” the advisor replied, a sly smile tugging at his thin lips. “Here in the Thirteenth Circle, we have perfected a method of distilling the essence of nightmares into liquid form. It is a substance of great value—exceedingly potent, with myriad uses. A drop of distilled nightmare can enhance a warrior’s fury or provide rich folk with... shall we say... *exquisite* entertainments. It sells for a king’s ransom in many realms.”

The Merchant’s eyes widened a bit. He had heard of stranger things in his career, but the trade in bottled nightmares was new to him. “I see. And what does this have to do with me?”

The owl-faced man glanced around to be sure no one else was listening, then continued. “Our Guild of Harvesters can offer you a hundred vials of the finest concentrated nightmare. In exchange, we ask only for three wagonloads—yes, three wagonloads—of top-quality gemstones. Deliver the gems within one year’s time, and the vials are yours to sell in any market you desire.” He spread his hands ingratiatingly. “It’s a rare opportunity. You won’t find such a deal offered too just anyone. What do you say?”

For a moment the Merchant forgot to breathe. A hundred vials of a miraculous substance that people in many worlds would pay handsomely to obtain... the potential profit was staggering. But three wagonloads of precious stones? In his mind’s eye he envisioned a towering mound of rubies, emeralds, and sapphires the size of melons—wealth beyond imagining, and exactly what this guild demanded from him. Where could he possibly lay hands on such a treasure trove? He calculated feverishly: perhaps if he sold every bolt of silk and all his spices and liquidated the new trade contract for quick cash... but even that would barely fill a single cart with gems, let alone three. Maybe he could take on partners or

loans from moneylenders—though the idea of indebting himself to unknown powers in a foreign land made his stomach twist.

The advisor saw the turmoil flitting across the Merchant's face and chuckled softly. "No need to answer immediately," he purred. "Sleep on it, my friend. But don't delay too long—the offer won't remain open indefinitely." He gave a deep bow. "When you decide, simply send word through the Governor's staff, and I will find you. May the gentle darkness grant you wisdom." With that, he slipped away, leaving the Merchant standing alone in the dim corridor, his mind awirl.

That night, despite the soft silken bed and the haven of the Governor's mansion, the Merchant found real sleep elusive. He tossed on the velvet sheets, his thoughts churning between one option and the other. On one hand lay a path of steady, honorable trade: fair deals like the ones he had made today that, while not immediately spectacular, would enrich both his world and this one over time. On the other hand, lay the risky venture dangled by the owl-faced advisor: a chance to multiply his wealth beyond his wildest dreams—if only he could pay the steep entry price. It was a gamble that could either catapult him into fortune or bury him in ruin. He stared at the ornate plaster ceiling, imagining it weighed down with the three wagonloads of gems he did not have. In the end, the Merchant drifted into a fitful half-sleep, still undecided and haunted by visions of gleaming vials and impossible heaps of treasure.

With the first light of dawn, Canary gently roused the party. It was time to continue to their original destination—the great interdimensional Port. The Merchant, bleary-eyed and unrefreshed, followed the Sage and Canary out of the Thirteenth Circle's gates. Despite his fatigue, he noticed that the Sage seemed preoccupied, glancing now and then over his shoulder as if searching the morning shadows for something unseen. The Merchant himself was too distracted by his own worries to give it much thought.

The road ahead stretched across a desolate moor, splitting after a few miles into three branches. One branch meandered toward

distant mountains, where the Governor had mentioned the realm's gem mines lay. Another led off through a dense marsh, and the final road continued straight toward the Port of Other Worlds. The group had just reached this three-way crossroads when two ragged shapes lunged out from behind a cairn of stones. They were highwaymen—scruffy human bandits with scarves tied over their faces, wielding crude spears fashioned from sharpened stakes. With a hoarse cry, they rushed at the travelers, desperate and wild-eyed.

Canary reacted faster than thought. She darted forward and unleashed a single, sharp chirp that pierced the air like a needle. One thief instantly dropped his weapon and clutched his head, collapsing to his knees with a howl of pain as Canary's sonic attack sent daggers of agony through his mind. The second bandit, stumbling in confusion, scarcely registered the Sage stepping calmly into his path. He breathed a single word and made a gentle sweeping gesture with his hand. At once the would-be robber sank into a deep stupor, falling face-first onto the road in a snoring heap.

It was over almost as quickly as it had begun. The Merchant stood frozen, trying to process what had just happened. After the bizarre and otherworldly threats, they'd faced in recent days, this laughable attempt by ordinary brigands felt surreal. He nudged one of the unconscious figures with the toe of his boot. "They...they're real," he murmured in disbelief, half expecting the bandits to dissolve into smoke or shadows. But these were just flesh-and-blood men, now pacified and harmless.

The Sage tied the bandits' hands loosely with a length of rope and dragged them off the main road, so they would not be trampled by passing carts when they awoke. The Merchant helped, still shaking his head. "Of all things, common robbers... I almost feel sorry for them," he admitted under his breath. "They picked the wrong travelers to ambush," Canary chimed, settling back onto the Sage's shoulder. She sounded more amused than angry.

Just beyond the crossroads, the travelers came upon a peculiar sight. An ancient stone archway straddled a side path that led into a cope of gnarled trees. Tattered banners hung from the arch, their

emblems long since bleached illegible. On either side of the arch stood two statues of trolls carved from grey rock. The trolls were captured in dynamic poses—one mid-sprint, the other raising an axe—yet their features were contorted in what looked like terror. Moss clung to their blank eyes and open mouths. The Merchant couldn't resist a nervous chuckle. "It looks like someone's roadside art installation... or a very macabre souvenir stand," he joked softly, though in truth he suspected the trolls had not been statues to begin with. Perhaps some ancient magic or the light of dawn had turned them to stone during a chase.

As they passed under the arch, Canary suddenly gave a strange little squeak and fluttered off the Sage's shoulder. She hovered a few feet above the ground, bobbing in the air as if sniffing out a scent. "There," she trilled, flitting toward a patch of earth near the base of the petrified axe-wielding troll. "Something's hidden here!"

Intrigued, the Sage and Merchant joined her at the spot. The ground looked undisturbed, covered in weeds and creeping ivy, but Canary was emphatically tapping her beak on one patch of soil. The Merchant needed no further prompting. He pulled a folding spade and began to dig. Before long, his spade struck wood—a small, buried chest, bound in corroded iron. He hauled it up and pried it open. Inside, nestled on a bed of rotting velvet, lay three curious items: a tarnished brass compass that glowed faintly as if enchanted, a portable sundial of intricate design, and a delicate silver hairpin set with a tiny moonstone that pulsed with a gentle light. The Merchant held up the hairpin, and its pale radiance grew just enough to illuminate the immediate area without drawing distant attention. It was as if the pin knew a new owner had found it. Without quite knowing why, the Merchant pinned the little trinket to his cloak. It gave him a small, inexplicable comfort, its subtle glow reassuring him that some light would always guide his way in darkness.

While the Merchant inspected these treasures, the Sage had drawn out the old scroll that the goblin chief had tossed into their bargain the day before. He unrolled the brittle parchment and carefully deciphered lines of faded script and diagrams. His eyes widened a

fraction as he realized what he held—a map and set of riddles leading to an ancient hidden cache. He glanced up at the Merchant. “Why did you think to give this to me, back when we traded with the goblins?” he asked quietly.

The Merchant shrugged, still admiring the strange moonstone pin on his cloak. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “It just felt... important. When we were crossing that valley yesterday, I had an intuition it might be meant for you.”

The Sage nodded slowly, a smile playing on his lips. “And indeed, I believe it was. This scroll holds the key to something I have heard about for a long time.” He tapped a spot on the map drawn on the parchment. “It seems our journey has one more detour in store, if you are willing. What say you to a bit of treasure hunting?”

The Merchant readily agreed, and so for the rest of that day the trio followed the cryptic directions of the scroll. They left the main road and ventured through untamed countryside—across stony fields and through a stretch of misty woods—guided by the Sage’s deciphering of ancient clues. By twilight, Canary’s keen senses and the scroll’s guidance led them to a lonely granite outcrop half-hidden by brambles. Etched into the rock was a symbol exactly matching one drawn on the parchment: a small circle within a triangle. “This is the place,” Bimbalf said, brushing away vines to reveal a narrow crevice in the stone face. One by one, they squeezed through the crack in the rock, lantern first, and emerged into a lightless cavern beyond.

The air inside was stale, tinged with the scents of dust and old leather. The Sage spoke a word, causing his lantern to flare brighter. They found themselves standing in a broad underground hall, lined with pillars carved in the likeness of ancient warriors. Time had covered everything in a thick layer of dust. Rusted weapons and pieces of armor lay scattered about—a guardroom long abandoned. The Merchant ran a finger along a blade leaning against the wall and drew back with a yelp as it nicked him; despite the ages, the sword’s edge was still keen. “There’s powerful preservation magic at work here,” murmured the Sage. He was right

—these arms and armor were of superb craftsmanship, untouched by rust or rot.

They ventured deeper, down a winding stair and through a narrow passage concealed behind a toppled statue. At the passage's end, a heavy stone door engraved with runes barred their way. But as Canary alighted on the door, the runes glowed in recognition, and with a rumble the slab slid aside. Beyond it lay a vast treasure chamber. Even the Sage caught his breath. Piled high were chests of coins so ancient their minting kingdoms were long lost to history, gilded goblets and suits of armor inlaid with jewels, banners and tapestries rolled up and preserved, and myriad artifacts of eras gone by. In the center of the hoard stood a towering granite statue of a stern-looking orc chieftain. "Ghaneman," the Sage whispered, recognizing it. "One of the last Orcish kings. This must have been his great vault, hidden away before the fall of his fortress."

The Merchant wandered in a daze between heaps of wonders, feeling as though he had stepped into a legend. There were weapons etched with glowing runes, talismans humming with dormant enchantments, and leather-bound books whose pages crackled with arcane energy. A single dragon's scale, big as a buckler shield, hung on the far wall—a trophy of some ancient battle. For all the wealth gathered here, the cavern felt oddly peaceful rather than cursed. If a dragon had once claimed this hoard, it was long gone, and no malice lingered now.

They did not attempt to carry off much—just a few items that called to each of them personally. Canary settled upon a fine golden earring shaped like a serpent devouring its own tail, set with a tiny crimson eye. "For my other form," she joked with a wink, tucking the trinket safely under her wing. Bimbalf chose a triangular stone tablet inscribed with minute Elvish script—some lost piece of lore that he looked eager to study. As for the Merchant, his eye was drawn to a small mechanical cube no larger than a die, covered in interlocking gears and folds. When he picked it up, the cube unfurled in his hand like a blossoming flower, reshaping itself into a perfect sphere that glowed softly. He felt a gentle thrum from it, almost like a heartbeat, synchronized with his own. "I wonder what

you are,” he murmured, rolling the mysterious object between his palms. Whatever its purpose, he had a sense it was meant to accompany him.

Once they had carefully stowed their chosen keepsakes, the Sage produced a quill and marked the vault’s precise location on a map of the region. “We shall inform the Governor of this place when we return,” he said. “It rightfully belongs to this land’s history. But at least we three can say we were the first to glimpse it anew.” The travelers stepped back out into the cool night, hearts still pounding with excitement. They camped briefly under the stars, too weary from exploration to journey further. But none of them slept deeply; their dreams were filled with visions of ancient glory and the treasures they had seen.

At dawn, they made their way back toward the city outskirts. The Merchant, mindful of the valuables tucked in his pack, decided to liquidate some of the smaller relics from the goblin’s pouch of trinkets while they had the chance. Sure enough, near the city gates they found a trader in a bright red coat setting up a stall. The Merchant discreetly showed the goblin a sampling of jewelry and oddments from the pouch. The goblin’s eyes grew round behind his spectacles. “Wherever did you get these?” he gasped, turning a silver amulet over in his claws. “This workmanship—why, these are treasures from the Lost Homes! Elven make, everyone. My shop will buy *all* of it, good sir, at top price.”

The Merchant suppressed a grin. He had suspected as much. The “junk” the goblins had traded to him was anything but. In short order, coins and notes of credit changed hands, and the Merchant found himself significantly richer. The trinkets he had nearly discarded were worth more than his entire original caravan of goods. As he walked away from the stall, he shook his head in amazement and chuckled to himself. “And to think,” he murmured, “all this came about because I followed a tiny yellow bird into an adventure.” Canary, overhearing, puffed out her chest proudly.

By the next morning, the three companions were truly on their way to the Port of Other Worlds. They departed the hospitable city of the Thirteenth Circle amid heartfelt farewells and expressions of goodwill. The road ran along the top of an old stone dam for a while, with marshy lakes gleaming to their left and rows of weathered statues of unknown heroes lining the right. After the previous day’s excitements, the journey felt peaceful. Canary snoozed lightly, nestled in the Sage’s hood, recovering from the liqueurs and adventures of the day before. The Merchant walked in thoughtful silence, the new weight of coin in his purse and of decisions in his mind making him pensive.

When the sun climbed toward noon, they arrived once more at the three-way crossroads. To the left, the road wound up into the craggy mountains where glittering gem mines supposedly awaited. Straight ahead, the road led down to the sea and the Port beyond. At this fork stood a simple wooden signpost. One arrow was labeled **HARBOR** and pointed seaward; another, labeled **HIGH MINES**, angled toward the peaks.

Here the Merchant slowed his pace and finally came to a halt. He

stared down the mountain road, where promises of untold riches beckoned—and with them, entangling obligations and dangers he could only guess at. Then he turned to look down the other path, toward the distant masts and cranes of the Port that were just barely visible as tiny silhouettes against the sky. His heart wavered between the two.

The Sage stopped beside him. “Well, my friend,” Bimbalf said gently, “it seems the time has come for a decision. Our paths may part here.” He nodded toward the mountain road. “The Canary and I are bound for the harbor. But if you intend to pursue that great venture you spoke of, you may need to go in the other direction, to seek those mines and the fortune within.”

Canary hopped out of the Sage’s hood and alighted atop the signpost, blinking sleepily at the Merchant. “Decide quickly, won’t you?” she chirped, half teasing. “The ale at the port tavern is calling my name, and it won’t stay cold forever.” Her tone was light, but her keen gaze belied her concern.

The Merchant stood silently for a long moment. His mind replayed the Governor’s warning about conscience and the Canary’s playful admonishment not to cheat others. He thought of the friends he had made on this journey, the lessons he had learned, and the unexpected wealth already jingling in his pockets from honest trade. He even noticed that the little moonstone hairpin on his cloak had begun to emit a gentle glow once more in the midday gloom—a glow that fell upon the road toward the harbor, as if illuminating that path just for him. Finally, the Merchant drew a deep breath and smiled. “I’ll go with you to the port,” he said firmly. “All the deals and treasures can wait.” He adjusted the straps of his pack and added with a contented sigh, “Besides, what good is all the gold in the world if there’s no one to share a toast with at the end of the day?”

A broad grin broke over the Sage’s face, and Canary let out a trilling cheer. She fluttered back to the Merchant’s shoulder, nudging his cheek fondly. “Good choice,” she whispered. “I’d have missed you terribly if you’d gone the other way. And remember—greed has

brought many a fool to ruin.” Her tone was joking, but the Merchant could hear the earnest relief beneath it.

He chuckled, feeling as though a great weight had lifted off him. “No fear, your feathery nag,” he replied warmly. “I haven’t forgotten. I’ll keep my greed in check from now on.”

Together they took the harbor road. And as the afternoon sun began to dip, the landscape opened onto a breathtaking vista. At the foot of a long slope lay the Port of Other Worlds—a sprawling seaside city humming with life and magic. Great wooden piers jutted out into a restless turquoise sea. Moored along them were ships of every shape and size: galleons with black sails and golden figureheads, graceful schooners with billowing white canvas, and even one vast vessel perched atop the shell of a living giant turtle, its flippers gently fanning the water. Beyond the docks, at the very edge of a rocky promontory, stood a colossal stone archway crackling with blue energy: the legendary Portal, a gateway through which travelers from countless realms came and went.

The city streets near the waterfront were crowded with an astonishing medley of folk. The Merchant saw humans, elves, and dwarves jostling alongside horned devils, scaled lizard-men, and other stranger beings he had no name for. Vendors hawked grilled fish and spiced meats from sizzling stands, and street performers—some human, some not—entertained passersby with music and magic. A salty breeze carried the mingled scents of brine, tar, and exotic spices. It was exhilarating and overwhelming all at once.

The Sage and his companions made their way to a tavern just off the main dock. A painted wooden sign swinging above the door showed a grinning demon holding a crooked walking stick: **The Crooked Demon Inn**. Inside, it was dim and pleasantly smoky. Sailors and merchants drank side by side with creatures

from far-flung worlds. In one corner a group of grim-faced orcs clinked tankards with delicate, pointy-eared fairies; in another, a pair of brawny minotaur mercenaries arm-wrestled while a cheering crowd placed bets.

Bimbalf, Canary, and the Merchant squeezed into a snug booth made from the hull of a retired ship. No sooner had they settled than the innkeeper—a portly one-eyed demon—came hurrying over. He nearly dropped his tray when he recognized the little yellow bird perched on the table. “Lady Canary! Master Sage!” he exclaimed, his single eye widening. “It’s been ages since you graced my tavern. Your drinks tonight are on the house, of course!” With great fanfare he presented them with foaming flagons of the tavern’s best dark ale, brewed with smoked caramel malt and rumored to have restorative properties.

The Merchant wrapped his hands around the cool, dewy mug and sighed in delight after the first sip. The beer was rich and velvety, with a sweet undertone that lingered on the tongue. All the tensions of the past days seemed to ebb away in that moment. He raised his tankard high. “To our strange and wondrous journey!” he declared, his eyes shining. “Who would have thought, when we first met on the road, that it would lead us here?”

“Hear, hear!” Canary chimed, dipping her beak appreciatively into her own thimble-sized cup of brew. “We’ve had a grand old time—and not a scratch on us to show for it, mind!” She winked a beady eye.

The Sage smiled into his frothy ale and gazed out one of the tavern’s round porthole windows at the harbor beyond. Sunset painted the sky in streaks of aquamarine and gold over the water. “Indeed,” he said softly. “Sometimes the journey is more important than the destination. This adventure has taught each of us a great deal.”

The Merchant set down his drink and looked thoughtfully at his companions. "I can't deny that" he said. "Though I must ask, Bimbalf... if I understand right, you could have taken us through a portal straight from that first tavern to this port and spared us all the troubles along the way. Why didn't you?" He spoke with a grin, but he truly was curious.

The old Sage's eyes twinkled. "In theory, yes—I could have conjured a shortcut or two," he admitted. "But then we would have missed out on so many fine things: friendly goblin negotiations, feasts with new allies, hidden treasures... and this very moment." He lifted his mug gently. "This ale, for example, was brewed just last week and rolled into the port this morning. It's best enjoyed here, now, earned after a long road."

"Exactly!" Canary giggled, tapping her thimble against the Merchant's mug in a tiny toast. "And for the record, I could have flown to the port in no time—had I chosen to become a dragon for a spell. But what fun would that have been, compared to tromping through marshes and forests with the two of you?" She gave a melodramatic sigh. "Alas, the sacrifices I make for good company."

They all laughed heartily, the sound of it mingling with the tavern's ambient cheer. When their mirth subsided, the Merchant sat back, feeling a glow not only from the ale but from pure contentment. He patted the breast pocket of his cloak, where several rolled-up contracts were tucked away. There was much work ahead—deals to finalize, shipments to arrange—but he found himself looking forward to it. It was honest work that would benefit many, and he knew now it could be done without losing himself in the process.

For a few minutes, the three friends simply savored their well-earned rest. The Sage hummed an old traveling song under his breath. Canary dunked her beak in a bowl of roasted nuts the innkeeper had provided, crunching happily. The Merchant let his gaze wander contentedly across the tavern—a motley assortment of adventurers and wanderers not unlike themselves—and felt a kinship with them all.

Finally, Canary could contain her energy no longer. She fluttered up onto the rim of the table's lantern and raised her tiny cup high (with both talons to keep it steady). "What shall we drink to know, gentlemen?" she chirped. "To new adventures, I say! May the next journey be even more outrageous than the last!"

Grinning, the Merchant and the Sage lifted their mugs and gently clinked them against Canary's thimble. "To new adventures!" they echoed.

Foam sloshed over onto the table as they all took a hearty draught. Canary sneezed as a frothy bubble tickled her nose, prompting another round of laughter from them all.

Unnoticed by the celebrating trio, a hooded figure sat in a dim corner of the tavern, cloaked in grey rags that blended into the smoke. This was the very same shadow that had been quietly trailing them since that night in the abandoned tavern. In truth, the Sage had chosen the long road to the Port partly to confirm the presence of this furtive observer. Who was he? And why did he follow, never intervening, only watching and listening? Those questions remained unanswered, for even now the stranger kept to his silence.

The grey figure flipped shut a worn leather-bound journal in which he had been scribbling notes. His task here was finished. The tale of the Thirteenth Circle had been faithfully recorded; every thread of the narrative woven neatly to its end. But as the watcher stood and melted into the tavern's shadows, he allowed himself a small smile. Though one journey had reached its happy conclusion, in the great tapestry of worlds every ending was but a new beginning waiting to unfold. And so, as the laughter of the three companions rang out brightly behind him, the mysterious chronicler slipped away into the gathering dusk beyond the tavern door. The cycle continues...

"Aquamarine Sky: Shadow over Utopia"

Calm.

East Berlin, basement, a bar with no name. No neon signs, no advertisements—just a “geschlossen” sign on the door and a heavy wooden frame with one word: *Ruhe*. Silence. There are no cameras, no music, no random faces. People do not come here because of ads, only by the call of the past.

Max Petersen, broad-shouldered and silent, sits down at a long table against the wall. His raincoat is slightly damp from the drizzling rain — a typical Berlin autumn. Today, the bar is full of field agents. Two from the analytical bureau sit at the table, one from the diplomatic group — and one in the field. They are bound together by both service and memory. Shared, archived memories. The evening is devoted mostly to exchanging experiences and unloading, because not everything can be said openly, and everyone here is already in the know; they just need to read the needed document. And here, they are more often amazed by the idiocy of other countries.

“Remember the news about how MI6 tried to infiltrate through postal logistics?” Max begins lazily, sipping his warm beer. “One of their guys — some lieutenant — sent instructions to

himself under our name, to his home address. A clever plan, hard to trace. The postal service mixed something up and returned it to sender. That is, to us. **“Mail and Betrayal”** — that is what we called it.”

Laughter. Someone coughs hoarsely. Schnapps goes around the table.

“And that was it. The operation died faster than tea in a British canteen,” grunts senior analyst Wojciech. “We did not even have to respond. Agent, you only observed?”

“Only documented it,” Max shakes his head. “I wrote in the report: **“English operational cunning: cannot brew without boiling water.”**”

The next morning, a new folder appeared on the table. It contained a description of the case they had discussed yesterday.

“Max, I have been looking at this and thinking. Is it a coincidence or is it the system at work?”

The case was simple. On the first page, an explanation was carefully attached:

Case No. 998-33-22-6E

The scheme was absurdly simple, old school: British intelligence had decided to use logistics companies as a channel of infiltration. Not a network of hackers, not drones, not cyber algorithms — but... the postal service. They were going to send out flash drives with Trojans disguised as “working materials” for local administrators and accountants.

The problem was that one of the key logistics points — in Leipzig — was run by a former Stasi officer. On paper, he was just a storekeeper, but out of habit he was an archivist, a scanner, a

paranoid.

He noticed a discrepancy in the batch numbers on the postage stamps — the batch was too “new” for the current stamp series. And another thing: there was only one flash drive in the envelope. He did not open it; he sent everything back.

Forty-eight hours later, the entire MI6 operation was exposed. The agent disappeared without even having time to delete his messenger app. All that remained on the analysts’ screens was a line from the correspondence: *“Check. Everything according to plan. The package is gone.”*

“The package may be gone,” Max grinned, “but the brains are still in the warehouse.”

Max thoughtfully twirled a clay mug between his fingers. At the bottom was a slightly warm remnant of coffee. On the table in front of him was a printout of a document intercepted two years ago. He had read it dozens of times, but only today did something in it send a shiver of recognition down his spine. A simple phrase: *“Contact initiated via a network of 16 points. Activate parallel vector via youth platform.”*

He messaged Mario, an analyst from Venice who usually responded quickly if he had already poured himself a shot of schnapps. Mario replied quickly: **“Is this true, or are**

you just having a flashback?”

Max did not answer right away. He took out an old folder — brown, with a leather cover, no stamps. He flipped to a bookmark labeled *“DC#0135/Beta.”*

“It is not a flashback. It is a repeat. Same mistake. Same style. Only now it is worse.”

He placed the folder on the table.

The House in the Mountains

Washington, winter. Gray skies, cafeterias with watered-down coffee, security everywhere. The Intelligence Ministry had decided to “rejuvenate” its approach to infiltration. The minister insisted that his son, Marshall Burns, participate in a new cyber espionage project.

His son, a 24-year-old with a degree in fashion and social communications, suggested, “We need to go where everyone is. To TikTok. Viral marketing, challenges, VPN advertising, dropout bloggers.”

Max read this part of the report with irritation. Not because young people are stupid, but because they are too self-confident. Especially when they are protected by their father.

The platform was launched under the name *UtopiaNow*. They sold VPN services, but with the message: *“You are a hacker. Hack the system. Be free. Become a shadow.”*

The first commercial was shot on a rooftop in Brooklyn. A girl in a balaclava—evoking the French protest aesthetic—launched the TOR browser and giggled. And within a second, there it was: the digital signature, the outgoing route, clicks, metadata. Everything. In German hands.

In Berlin, analysts merely smirked. One of the interns, incidentally a former music video director, immediately identified the production studio. Within two hours, the studio's address, the curator, and the bank accounts were known.

Ten hours later, the UtopiaNow network was dismantled. Not a single node remained. Only protocols and indictments.

"How did you find out?" an American contact once asked me in a backroom café near Munich.

"You told us everything yourself. We just listened," Max replied at the time.

He really did not interfere. He drank tea and met with the right people. One dinner with a Polish diplomat, one tour of an Austrian archive, one whisper from a former lobbyist in Luxembourg — and he had full access to the U.S.-Alpha Track cyber operations program.

He did not ask for anything. But they offered it to him.

"Help us lobby for access to the data, and we will give you the list of operations. Want it? All the archives, just not a word to anyone."

Max nodded. Smiled. And soon he received logins, keys, lists. And then... everything went up in smoke because of a boy who decided that TikTok was the new MI6.

Der Spiegel ran the headline: "*Corruption Needs No Enemies.*"

The nephew was urgently recalled. The minister resigned. And in the analytical circles of the bloc, only one voice was heard:

"Well, one move down, five calculated ahead. Your move, gentlemen."

Max's next assignment took him to a mountain cabin. Cold, wooden, with peeling shingles—it looked uncannily familiar. Just like the one from the 1932 file.

This was where he had written. Drunk coffee. Read philosophy. And then he went back down to the city. He was tormented by the

question of why he had been sent here and why this place seemed so familiar to him.

Clues in the “Compromising Material Without Facts” case had led him here, and there was an informant here for another case, but there was something else... With these thoughts, he scanned the notes again.

The Paris cell had attempted a classic operation: hacking the personal phone of the German Minister of Justice. They leaked the supposed compromising information to the media. But the bloc’s agency had already anticipated this and released a fake document in advance. When the French side tried to use the materials in negotiations, the minister laughed: “Read it more carefully. My date of birth is 2029.”

It all turned into a diplomatic humiliation. Max made a note: *“Compromising information without facts is like wine without aging. A headache is guaranteed.”*

The metadata on the leaked files pointed to this place. They were conducting searches at several facilities, and one of them was now Max’s destination.

A camp. A children’s camp, from the outside. But behind its walls, teenagers were learning not to march, but to falsify. To edit headlines. To create fake news. They said it was a course in “media repolarization.” It was called *“Truth for Breakfast.”*

That same evening, a defector arrived here. One of their own — frightened, carrying an archive in his hands and requesting asylum. He chose a house in the forest because he had seen it before. In a book. In a movie. Or maybe in a dream.

Max waited for the defector in a hunting lodge. It was large,

unadorned, one might even say modest. There were many like it around here. Hunters could rest after a successful day or prepare for the next hunt in comfort. Wooden, with a stove and a window perfectly facing the southern slope of Berghof. Each room had its own washroom, and the large hall with a fireplace was the perfect place for evening gatherings.

“The most devastating failure did not come from outside,” said a male voice from the speakerphone, “but from within the West. The son of the head of U.S. intelligence ran a secret network trading in horrific pornographic content, including material involving minors. When he was caught, he posted the entire archive online, thinking it would save him.

Hundreds of names—officials, ministers, judges. We need to watch quietly for now. Not because we do not know, but because we anticipate what is coming.” Max sat at the terminal. He simply whispered, “They burned themselves.”

This defector’s story did not start as an escape, but as a grudge. He was not a spy. He did not have access to state secrets in the classic sense. He was fired from the “Department of Oblivion” — an archive section where papers, electronic traces, and personal files were destroyed. He was just a clerk, but he had a good memory. And a conscience.

By chance, he stumbled upon an old archive dating back to the 1930s. It mentioned a program overseen by several countries. More than a hundred names. At first, he thought it was a mistake. Then a coincidence. And then he found an audio recording. It had not been deleted. Apparently, someone had forgotten about it. There was a child’s voice. And another. And an adult.

He did not sleep for three days. He watched, listened, compared. There were more names. The faces matched those of current ministers, judges, oligarchs. Every day brought him a more complete picture of hell. Some of the videos were on old tape. Some were very recent. Some were so brazenly staged that it was easy to recognize the island that once belonged to a millionaire who had “committed suicide.” Or who had been helped to do so.

He took everything. He printed it out at a regular print shop, like

ordinary delivery reports. Paper. Pictures. Signatures. Agency logos. Then he burned the copies and gradually moved the originals to his garage. He digitized them. He searched for a long time for someone to turn them over to. But he did not trust anyone. He tried to post them online — and he did. The first wave passed unnoticed. Then one blogger noticed a discrepancy in the archives, and off it went.

The State Department began a purge. The police froze all his accounts. His mother disappeared. His friends unfollowed him. The hunt began. His name was entered into databases as an internal terrorist. He fled. He changed passports. He lived in hostels. In one of them, he worked as a dishwasher in Prague. Then he was a driver in Bratislava. But he knew he would not last long.

He chose the Union of Free Republics. Germany was the only country where no one pretended that it had not happened. He followed every statement made by their Ministry of Justice. He saw how they gradually isolated the suspects. They issued arrest warrants for dozens of people. They held hearings. No sensationalism, no panic. With cold clarity. He believed them.

And the house in the forest was from his memory. Almost the same as in an old German film, where a family survived in the mountains after the war. In the film, there was a boy who went out at night to look at the sky. There were northern lights, even though they were not in the north. The boy said, “It appears when the soul asks for truth.”

The defector brought a bag with him. Inside were a USB stick, notes, flash drives, and a few discs. He laid them out on the table. Max sat opposite him, not interrupting. The defector spoke as if he were confessing. He no longer believed he would survive. He wanted someone to know that he had at least tried.

“They thought it was just pornography,” he said. “But it is a cult. They have a whole structure there. And it is not about pleasure. It is about control. About power over pain. Over childhood. Over reality.”

Max did not answer. He just opened the window. Cold mountain air hit his face. An owl hooted somewhere in the distance. The house stood silent, like an archive that no one dared to burn.

Here is the structure and text of the appendix from the defector — a moralistic note appended to the case. The title, photos (as if they were real), and tone are consistent with a professional yet personal moral manifesto. It looks like an explanatory note attached to the archive, accompanying the physical materials.

Appendix to the case file “Operation: Raven’s Eye”

Archive registration number: 47-BG/
ES/2030

Status: Defector, voluntary transfer of
materials

Name of defector (cover): Friedrich G. M.

Former department: D-17 (document flow
and final disposal)

Subject: Accompanying note to the archive
(materials have been removed but are
available in the public segment of the
network)

Attached materials:

- Case materials in a shoebox labeled “Void – discard,” dated 2029-12-01.
- Photo: fragments of paper (restored).
- System access card (cancelled).
- Boxes with cassettes, film reels, discs, flash drives, and two large storage devices. There was everything from a list of IP addresses marked “FR Protocol Fail” to a complete dossier with meeting data and *wishes*, as well

- as plans for subsequent operations.
- File and voice memo titled “I could not help doing it.”

Audio note from the defector:

“People forget too quickly. Especially things they do not want to remember.

But I cannot. And I do not want to be part of that.

That is why you are reading this.

They called me “Silent.” Because I did not argue, did not stick my neck out, and did not agree with anyone. I just did my job. In Department D-17, they called us “gravediggers.” We burned compromising evidence, extra copies, and unverified operation reports. Officially, it was called *disposal*. Unofficially, *erasure*. Erasure of memories, faces, stories. Morals.

In mid-2029, boxes marked NS-PRD / LVL-Black were delivered to my desk. These are usually destroyed without being opened. But one box was open. Inside were printouts of correspondence, bank statements, photos of minors — with signatures. The signatures were of people whose names resound at every G7 conference. They sit in senates. They sign trade agreements. They force countries to embrace “democracy.”

I could not destroy it.

Why me?

Because I had no connections. Because I did not attend corporate dinners. Because I once refused to turn a blind eye to the disposal of another case — about torture on a private plane. Because I know how to say “no.” And I do it at length, with arguments. And people

are afraid of that. Because you cannot buy us. We do not keep quiet out of politeness.

What did I do?

I rewrote everything by hand. Every detail. Every file. Every access path. Then I put it in a regular folder. Under the form. Under my coffee cup. Under the guise of fatigue. I disappeared. I searched for a long time for where to post it — and made a mistake. Panic. Everything was uploaded to the network. I did not leak the archive — but I pressed Enter. I left the originals. Including the printouts I ran away with. I was left with memories. And morals.

What next?

You may consider this treason. Or sacrifice. You may cross out my name. It did not matter anyway. But I ask one thing: do not close your eyes. Do not due to this case what you did to hundreds before it. Let this document be a scar. Let it remind you:

“If you see an abyss, do not pretend it is just a shadow.”

— F.G.M.

January 2032

End of audio file.

Case Unity-33, file No. 6

Berlin, Unity-33 forum. A spacious pavilion made of glass and light wood stands in the heart of the city. Inside, the light is soft and diffused; the ceilings are high, and in some places the walls are completely absent, giving way to terraces with living trees. The air is fresh, as if after a thunderstorm, even though there has been no rain — the filtration and humidification system work silently, creating a comfortable microclimate.

The forum is divided into country pavilions, but the boundaries between them are open: instead of solid walls, there are transparent spaces so that guests can move freely from hall to hall. Each country of the socialist bloc presents its own corner of the future:

- **Germany** – an area of energy-independent cooperatives with a

model city where each house generates its own electricity.

- **Italy** – exhibits on preserving cultural heritage through digital archives accessible to all.
- **The Balkan countries** – a joint project called the “Green Belt” for reforestation of the countryside.
- **Japan** – robot tour guides and artificial intelligence assistants to help people with disabilities in daily life.
- **India** – models of rural eco-communities where the budget is distributed by residents through a digital town hall meeting.
- **China** – air and water purification technology offered under an open license.

All these projects have one thing in common: cooperation. There are no corporate logos, no one selling shares or VIP passes. The materials used are wood, cotton, and recycled plastic. Instead of brochures, there are small softcover books: take one, read it, return it to the stand or pass it on to someone else. Visitors move from hall to hall as if strolling through a park of future knowledge. Faces are calm and engaged; children’s laughter can be heard somewhere — there are separate interactive areas for them, where they can assemble a small solar panel or program a robot to plant a seed. The atmosphere is clear and steady.

Max walks slowly, soaking up the calm. He is an agent, but now without his usual coat or badge — dressed in a light linen jacket, posing as a staff analyst for the Balkan delegation. He holds a tablet displaying the forum map: points of interest, discussion schedules. His task is not a strenuous one — it is mostly observing and recording details. *Progress* is the first word that comes to mind. Everything here exudes stability: from the confident steps of engineers explaining the principles of hydrogen power plants to a minister from Africa to the leisurely swaying of leaves behind a transparent wall.

There are also sections dedicated to the capitalist or classical management approaches, where the tone changes. The pavilion's architecture is the same, but the feeling is different — as if the air itself vibrates with tension. Here, the stands are more garishly decorated, more like advertisements. It is as if Las Vegas came to visit. Giant LED screens, blaring slogans. The United States has rented the central sector and filled it with glass cubes. In one cube, there is a presentation of the *NFT Fund to Fight Poverty*: the screen flashes smiling faces of poor people who will

purportedly be helped by selling unique tokens with their stories. In another cube, there is an interactive depiction of a prison, showcasing a concept of “*ethical surveillance*.” Visitors are invited to put on virtual reality headsets and *experience* what it is like when a teenager’s every move is monitored by a neural network. If they deviate from the “*norm*,” a chip implanted under their skin sends a signal to their parents and the police. “*Control is for the sake of security*,” reads the caption. Max felt a chill in his gut at this exhibit — control, surveillance, monetization of poverty, all under the guise of good intentions.

Next to it is the section of the international investment fund *New Frontiers*. On the wall is a huge banner depicting an all-seeing eye with the slogan: “*Develop your consciousness — control the world*.” Here, one of the most anticipated guests of the capitalist camp is preparing to speak: former U.S. senator and now guru of esoteric “cognitive labyrinths,” Richard Lowell. Once an influential politician who rose to fame at TED conferences with talks about *expanding the boundaries of the mind*, he now travels the world, promising

each follower the ability to control reality with the power of thought — a message he delivers from podiums and on YouTube alike. The hall is packed — journalists, miracle-seekers, conspiracy theorists. Images of pyramids, aliens, and neural networks flash across the screen behind the stage in a chaotic kaleidoscope designed to dazzle the audience.

Max stands off to the side, trying to remain inconspicuous. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Lowell's smug face on a poster, hands raised to the sky in a benevolent smile. But Lowell himself is not yet visible. Behind the stage, the foundation's assistants bustle about. One of them, a young man in an expensive suit, looks around nervously and whispers urgently into a walkie-talkie: "...cannot find her, she went out for water ten minutes ago and... Yes, that one... No, it is not here..." Max catches snatch of the conversation. He pretends to be absorbed in the schedule on his tablet, but he is listening intently. The assistant rushes off, nearly knocking over a visitor in his haste.

Max frowns. Water? He remembers a detail from the files: Lowell suffers from a rare metabolic disorder and, according to official statements, must drink only a specific brand of purified water enriched with silver ions. He always has crates of it on hand. It is strange that at a forum offering everything from coffee brewed from lab-grown beans to Alpine mineral water, they could not procure his brand. Or perhaps they did not intend to. Max notices a familiar figure nearby — Anya from the Eastern European department — who has just picked up that very brand of water from a tray. She meets his gaze and gives a slight nod. He responds in kind. Now it is clear: the water has been swapped. The bottles on the tray likely contain plain water. Deprived of his additive, Lowell is forced to drink what he is given.

At last, the assistants lead Richard Lowell onto the stage. Applause rises — but something is

off. The man who appears is draped in a long cloak with a hood like a monk's robe. Clearly the organizers had planned a dramatic entrance for the guru. However, the cloak glints oddly. Max narrows his eyes: is that... foil? Indeed, Lowell is wrapped in what looks like a long robe made of metallic foil. His bare feet show beneath the hem. The crowd hesitates in confusion. Here and there people chuckle — many assume it is part of the act, an eccentric costume for an *enlightened master*. But Max knows better: just this morning, Lowell was wearing an expensive Brioni suit, and now...

"They are here!" a sudden shout ring out. Lowell yanks the hood off his head. His face is ashen, his eyes wild and feverish. He casts his gaze around frantically, jabbing a finger at empty air. "They are everywhere! Ether parasites! I can hear their voices in my head!" His voice cracks into a scream.

The audience shrinks back. Assistants sprint towards him, but he darts away with surprising agility and leaps off the stage. His foil cloak flutters, revealing what is underneath... nothing. Aside from the cloak itself, Lowell is wearing no shirt or pants — his naked body is wrapped in foil, a pitiful parody of a Roman toga. People cry out in panic and scatter. Several phones are raised, recording the spectacle.

"Stop the forum! There is a conspiracy here! They tried... they tried..." Lowell shouts incoherently, but he does not finish: two security guards tackle him. He breaks free for an instant and frantically begins ripping the foil off himself, hurling shreds of metal at anyone nearby. "You have all been brainwashed!" he snarls in a final burst of frenzy, and then abruptly falls silent, collapsing to

the floor. The guards carefully roll him onto his back and call urgently for medics.

Chaos erupts in the hall. Some visitors flee, while others rush forward, eager to witness the scandal up close. On stage, the master of ceremonies stands pale as a sheet. A representative of the New Frontiers foundation grabs the microphone and stammers out something about the guest being over-excited — perhaps it is the jet lag — the forum will continue as planned... but almost no one listens. The first posts about the “naked senator in a tin foil hat” are already flooding social media. The U.S. delegation’s press office issues frantic denials, not yet sure how to explain any of this.

The Unity-33 forum officially continued for two more days, but after this incident it was already being called a disaster for the capitalist camp. The contrast was too stark: while the bloc of cooperative countries demonstrated progress without losing common sense, their opponents appeared to be losing control of themselves — and of reality. In the corridors, politicians from various countries whispered that this scene was the ultimate symbol of what was happening in the world. “They got carried away by their lust for profit, lost their bearings, and this is the result,” a member of the Latin American delegation muttered as he passed Max. Max noted to himself that they were not the only ones who saw it that way.

By the end of the forum, the bloc of cooperative nations had earned all the top Unity-33 awards and grants. The energy-independent regions project took the Grand Prix — a statuette shaped like the planet, entwined by a symbolic olive branch of peace. At the award ceremony, the bloc’s representatives spoke modestly but firmly. The President of the Federal Republic of Italy concluded his speech with the words: “*We are*

not chasing profit – and therefore we do not fall into the pit dug for others.” The applause was loud and sincere. Delegations from the Old World clapped as well — what else could they do? — but their faces were grim.

The Unity-33 forum closed without much fanfare. The final day was canceled “for security reasons and due to schedule constraints.” Everyone understood this for what it was: an attempt to swiftly sweep the scandal under the rug. But video of the deranged Richard Lowell had already spread globally, despite frantic censorship. People immediately dubbed him “the senator in a tin foil hat.” Just the day before, millions of devotees hung on his every word about the universe’s mysteries; now the same guru appeared to all as a textbook madman.

Chess Without War

Max stood by the window in an improvised situation room set up at a Berlin research institute. Two days had passed since the forum incident. It was night. Outside, the sky was greyish, ashen aquamarine, lit by the city’s glow. Dim, but calm. Stable. Max had spent the last two days with almost no sleep, assisting colleagues from the international investigative task force. *Chess without war*, the phrase spun in his mind. That was how one commentator had described what happened: the bloc had won without ever engaging in direct battle — simply by making the right moves and waiting for the enemy to drive

itself into a corner.

Servers hummed quietly behind Max. On the long table before him lay several holographic screens, documents, and printouts. In the center was a transparent medical pod, inside of which Richard Lowell rested with his eyes closed. The former senator was connected to dozens of wires and sensors. His eyes darted beneath the lids — perhaps dreaming, or in a state of neural scanning. Next to the capsule, a control panel glowed with readings: **“Vox Selenium — neuro-noise detected.”** The device’s indicators had started to drop since yesterday, after the doctors administered the antidote to Lowell. Now the neuro-noise line had flattened — the toxins and parasitic additives had been completely purged from his system, and consciousness was being restored. Symbiotic neural connections were re-forming.

“It is done,” Dr. Lin said, looking up from the scanner and rubbing her eyes. “The toxin has been fully eliminated, and neuronal circuits are regenerating.”

Max nodded. *Vox Selenium...* Latin for “silent voice.”

An experimental psi-drug, rumored to have been developed deep in some military lab or private corporation. Whispers said it was first tested on psychiatric patients, then on volunteers from a cult led by a false guru. It suppresses the will, turning a person into a relay for

someone else's ideas. Outwardly, it is almost impossible to tell: the victim behaves normally, except their pulse is lower and their pupils slightly constricted. But as soon as someone triggers a conditioned stimulus — say, a key phrase or even a certain taste of water — the person begins to spout pre-programmed lines, like a news anchor reading a script. Their own “self” is silenced, hidden deep inside, while a programmed alter ego surfaces. Lowell was likely one of the most extensive victims of such control: for years, he had been fed a drug that made him dependent on “special water,” and his ambitions were channeled in the desired direction. He became a loudspeaker, a “talking suit” — a shell through which others spoke.

And now the shell was empty — and the real Richard Lowell was waking up. The man in the pod stirred, his fingers twitched. Max gestured to the doctor, and she tapped a few keys. The capsule hissed softly as it opened. Lowell began breathing rapidly and opened his eyes. For a few seconds he stared silently at the ceiling, as if trying to remember where he was and who he was. Then his face crumpled, his chest heaved in a sob. He began to cry. Soundlessly, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Max handed him some water — plain, clean water — and said quietly:

“You are safe. This is a hospital. You are going to be alright.”

Lowell tried to sit up, but his body was weak, and he slumped back. His lips trembled.

“I... what have I done...” he whispered hoarsely. “God, what did they do to me?”

“It was a drug,” Max explained gently. “They were controlling you. The effects have worn off. You are yourself again.”

Lowell covered his face with his hands. Fresh tears flowed between his fingers — whether from relief or from the horror of realization. Max had seen this before: the look of a person who suddenly understands that part of his life was spent in a nightmare in which he committed irreparable deeds.

“Listen,” Max said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We need your

testimony. You want to find them, do you not? The ones who did this?”

The man lowered his hands from his face. Through the tears, a spark of determination appeared in his eyes. He gave a weak nod:

“Yes... Yes. I will tell you. I will tell you everything. Please, stop them...”

Max nodded to Dr. Lin, who handed Lowell an injector with a sedative solution.

“This will give you strength,” she said softly. “And it will also make it easier for you to remember.”

Lowell sprayed the solution into his nose and closed his eyes, taking a few deep, steadying breaths. After a minute, his breathing grew even, he opened his eyes, and began to speak — at first haltingly, then with increasing clarity.

He recounted how, several years ago, he had been all but ruined — beset by competitors, scandals, lost elections, debts. He was on the brink of despair when “they” came to him — representatives of an influential foundation called **UNITY Minds** (an ironic echo of the forum’s name, Max noted). They offered to help pay off his debts, fund his esoteric research, and introduce him to a new audience. *“You will be able to bring Knowledge to the whole world,”* they told him. The conditions were total confidentiality and absolute loyalty. He thought they meant sponsorship, that they would simply provide him a platform, and he agreed. He signed a

contract, barely remembering its details — before signing, they had given him a cocktail “to boost his energy.” After that, he remembered very little clearly. It was like a fog: he was taken to some research center, doctors, tests... Then followed endless meetings, training sessions, meditation practices. The water — they gave him special water and told him to drink only that to “*strengthen his mental field.*” He drank it, and it truly made him feel better; his anxiety subsided. And then... then came the voices. Strange voices in his head, blending with his own thoughts. Sometimes he could not tell where his thoughts ended, and the implanted ones began. And the dreams — endless nightmares where someone was experimenting on him, whispering: “Vox selenium, vox silentium...”

Lowell spoke in an almost monotone, head bowed. Max took notes, although everything was being recorded automatically anyway. The analysts listening in began asking clarifying questions: did he remember any names, faces, or places? He recalled: a research center named *Exodus* in southern Nevada; a Dr. Stern, a pathologist with a

predatory smile; a woman in a gray suit who always wore gloves, named Lorelai. The faces blurred in Lowell's memory, but the voices... He distinctly remembered one voice that often spoke via video call during briefings: hollow, hoarse, with an Eastern European accent. The man was reluctant to introduce himself, but after losing his temper and yelling at his subordinates, Lowell heard someone address him as "*Mr. Cools.*" Or *Colors? Colossus?* Unclear...

More details emerged: Vox Selenium had been administered gradually, in micro-doses through the water. Then the doses increased, especially before major public appearances. If Lowell ever had doubts or strayed from the script, a voice in his mind would whisper certain key words, and his consciousness would drop into a void, allowing the program to speak for him. Several years passed like this. Lowell became famous, gained followers, founded the "Cognitive Labyrinth Club" — essentially a cult financed by that UNITY Minds foundation. The foundation, it turned out, ran a network of "education centers" around the world, where behind the facade of meditation and lectures they conducted experiments in mind control and in selecting new candidates.

"UNITY Minds..." Max repeated, cross-checking a database. "Here it is: International Unity of Minds Foundation. Founders..." He scrolled through the file. "The founders are an offshore trust affiliated with **Olympion Group...**"

At those words, several people in the room

stirred. Olympion Group was a name well-known to international investigators. It was that very *rotten* conglomerate suspected of every mortal sin: from organ trafficking and human cloning to financing private military campaigns. Max felt his insides clench. These guys were a hard case. No direct evidence had ever stuck to them — too many cut-outs and front companies. But their name kept cropping up. The last time had been in connection with a lobbying scandal. It turned out that Olympion Group, via shell legislators, had been pushing laws to benefit companies involved in *body trading* — essentially, selling human bodies and lives to those who could pay.

Elegant talk of “biomedical innovation” had concealed hellish projects: sexual slavery under the guise of surrogate motherhood programs; vivisection of “cloned” humans for experimentation; even hunting human beings at exclusive resorts for ultra-wealthy maniacs. As I recall, some of the facts were made public at the time and an international scandal ensued, but the Olympion leaders wriggled free by pinning blame on minor contractors. Still, the stain remained, and the investigation simmered on. And now — a new trump card: ties to mind control and cults.

Max exchanged glances with Anya, who was now at one of the terminals, receiving updates. The chess game continued. A larger piece was entering the board.

“This significantly changes the case,” said the team leader, an American named David Hawk. It was clearly hard for him to admit that a massive conspiracy had been brewing under his very nose, on

his home soil. “We have a witness, a victim — and direct references to Olympion Group. Combined with the previous materials...”

“...they will have no chance to buy their way out,” Anya finished for him. “The element has been exposed, the antidote administered — people are waking up on their own and starting to ask very uncomfortable questions.”

Max gave a faint smile at her choice of words — that was exactly what had happened. As soon as one link in the chain was brought to light, the entire system collapsed.

“We must act quickly,” General Sato from the Japanese service broke in. “Before they destroy the evidence.”

“Already done,” Anya said, holding up a flash drive. “Our agent inside Olympion’s Brussels branch triggered the protocol an hour ago. We have copies of the servers and logs. All their transactions. Clients, suppliers... it is all there.”

David Hawk exhaled slowly, as if releasing the weight of the world from his shoulders.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “it looks like we got them.”

Max glanced over at Richard Lowell. He was sitting slumped against the inside of the open capsule, eyes closed as he listened to their conversation. He looked drained, but there was a shadow of relief on his face. Suddenly Lowell spoke softly:

“Do not kill them.”

Everyone in the room turned.

“Pardon?” General Sato asked.

Lowell opened his reddened eyes.

“Those who did this. Do not kill them. We do not need war,” he said weakly. “I... I want them to face justice. I want the world to know the truth. If they are simply eliminated, new monsters will take their place. But this way... they dug their own grave. Let everyone see what it is inside.”

Max felt involuntary respect. A man whose mind had been enslaved

was now thinking not of revenge, but of justice. Chess without war. To win not by destroying the pieces, but by exposing them for all to see.

“We agree,” Max replied softly. He looked around at his colleagues. They bowed their heads in solidarity. “No vigilante justice. Only a transparent trial and full public exposure.”

Lowell closed his eyes in gratitude.

A week later, an international consortium of human rights organizations published a report that turned the world upside down. The Olympion Group was incriminated — with detailed evidence — in dozens of crimes. Documents and video footage revealed secret laboratories and cells where *live goods* were kept. Files containing the names of hundreds of clients — from big businessmen to religious leaders — exploded across the information space. “All the psychos and perverts crawled out of the woodwork,” one journalist wrote. It turned out a well-known media mogul kept a personal *nursery* of cloned teenagers for his depraved pleasures; a group of high-ranking officials organized hunts of kidnapped refugees; and a few of the richest people on the planet were even funding research to transplant their brains into young bodies, stopping at nothing in pursuit of immortality. Each new revelation was more horrifying than

the last, turning the daily news into a grotesque horror film. Psychologists on TV tried to explain absolute power and permissiveness corrupts, erasing one's sense of reality — hence such monstrous forms of “entertainment.” Society erupted in anger. Protests flared up around the world, demanding those responsible be punished. Even the most cynical citizens — who previously waved off such “scare stories” — could no longer shut their eyes. The evidence was too direct, too clear.

History delivered its verdict instantly, even though the legal process was yet to come. People who had once been influential were now pariahs. They had gambled on total impunity — and lost. Some of those exposed, unable to wait for arrest, took their own lives, leaving behind a single sentence: *“This is the game we played...”* The Olympion Group effectively ceased to exist accounts frozen, offices sealed. The world held its breath awaiting the denouement — the trials, the convictions, and above all, answers to the burning question: **How could this have happened?**

...Max stepped out onto the balcony of that same Berlin research

institute where it all began. The night was quiet. An ashen-aquamarine sky stretched over Berlin — faintly glowing, with a light haze, but calm and steadfast, like a guard after a long day. Max looked up, then down at the city. Somewhere out there, beyond the rows of neat houses, lights were twinkling — perhaps people were celebrating a small local victory. A victory without war. Chess — the match was over, the enemy king defeated by his own hand. And the pieces were intact — all would face the light.

“You know what the problem is?” Max said softly, as if talking to himself or an unseen companion nearby. “We see trouble coming and try to avoid it. They just place their bets.”

He did not need an answer. He simply gazed at the steady glow of the distant streets. Somewhere out there, his colleagues were preparing for new games — the world was not a utopia yet, and there was much work to be done. But in that moment, Max allowed himself a small measure of pride. There was almost no bitterness left in his soul — only a faint, wry smile. Everything had turned out exactly as it should have: the forces of the old world, confident that they controlled everything, had fallen into the trap of their own greed and madness. They were undone not by bullets or bombs, but by the truth.

Max drew a deep breath of the cool Berlin air. A pale aquamarine sky spread above the free city. Chess without war — what a beautiful game after all.
game it was after all.